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Escape from the country: the gender politics of Chinese women in pursuit of transnational romance

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on two marginalized groups in Chinese society: 27-years old (or older) ‘left-over’ (never-married) women and divorced women. Both these kinds of women are subject to discrimination and ridicule by the mass media and even their own families. This essay argues that despite the economic prosperity China has enjoyed over the last thirty years, gender relations in the country are rooted in a patriarchal discourse that reveals a hybridity of old and new ideals – family responsibility and individual self-fulfillment – in which the pursuit of love and marital commitment cannot be divorced from larger social-cultural-economic structures that endorse intergenerational responsibility and obligation, as well as promote gender inequality in the home and workplace. For these two groups of ostracized women, romance with foreign men may seem an alternative to the constraints of this structural framework. Drawing from a pool of evidence, published interviews, media reports, and printed ethnographic studies, this study analyzes the predicaments of leftover and divorced women, the interactions between these women and foreign men, and what their experiences with these men say about gender and racial differences in relation to gender inequality.

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Introduction: gender inequality and marriage

China’s compressed modernity, from a socialist collective to a neoliberal consumer economy in which a ‘new moral-sexual-economic order’ has emerged, muddles how the ideals of marriage, gender roles, and personal fulfillment fit into this changing scenario (Sun and Wei 2017). Historically, espousal of the values of love and intimacy did not get much of a chance in twentieth-century China when the country became enmeshed into the two great discourses of liberation and revolution that ultimately prioritized a couple’s ideological commitment to the Communist Party (Pan 2015, 280). Beginning with the reforms of the 1980s, China’s rapid economic rise from third-world status to global superpower fueled new ways

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by which the material structures of power shaped meanings, values, and the very experience of emotion for both men and women. Masculinity increasingly came to entail financial success while femininity became tied to domesticity, 'softness', and youthful appearance. For women these changes are also intertwined with the problem of gender inequality in Chinese society which prioritizes sons over daughters, youth over age, beauty over average or unattractive appearance, femininity over intelligence and independence.

Two particular groups of women are vulnerable to such inequity: never-married working women and female divorcées are especially subject to gender discrimination and even ridicule. Single career women, particularly those with high incomes, age 27 or older, are labeled 'leftover' (*shengnü*), and stigmatized for their unmarried status (Ji 2015; Gaetano 2010; Hong Fincher 2014). The government, the media, and even their own families mock them for being 'too picky' in their choice of a partner. It would seem the ideal of femininity in which women perform the roles of nurturing mothers and care-givers outweighs appreciation of the talents and worldly-skills 'leftover women' possess. As two Chinese sociologists observe, the expression 'Better marrying well than having a successful career' (*gandehao buru jiadehao*) is an all too common piece of advice broadcast in the Chinese mainstream media (Sun and Chen 2015, 1091). Statistical research demonstrates that a woman's educational attainment has a negative effect on the timing of her marriage (Yu and Xie 2015). Divorced women also face derision as evidenced by the popular saying two Shanghai Fudan University sociologists evoke: 'Divorced women are like second-hand cars, while divorced men are like second-hand apartments. Cars depreciate once used, while apartments hold their value all the same' (Ding and Xu 2015, 109). Their study demonstrates that divorced men do not want a divorced woman as a new partner. Both *shengnü* and divorced women are subject to denigration: the former because they delay or may even shun marriage, and the latter because they are 'used goods'. But both groups are known to defy such disparagement, and to consider relationships and/or marriage with foreign men as a viable alternative. China's involvement in the global economy has brought hundreds of thousands of foreign men to the country while the internet has allowed divorcées, including those residing outside China's big cities, to expand their search for love and companionship beyond their own communities.

But romance and marriage between Chinese women and foreign men also create a host of dilemmas and difficulties which reflect, on the one hand, general societal expectations about the positive value of the traditional ideal of family, and on the other hand, the specific challenges of Chinese woman/foreign man relationships. To date there have been a number of publications focused on 'leftover women' and some on divorcées, but none of these studies have endeavored to integrate their results into a broader presentation aimed at situating the discourse of gender inequality and intimate relations between Chinese women and foreign men. This essay argues that whatever advancement in economic prosperity Chinese society has enjoyed over the last thirty years, gender relations in

China reveal a hybridity of old and new ideals – family responsibility and individual self-fulfillment – in which the pursuit of love and marital commitment becomes so intertwined with the degrading facets of gender essentialism that numbers of singleton women pursue foreign men as an alternative to Chinese husbands.

This study is divided into four parts. The first section considers theoretical approaches to modernization and personal relationships, and contemplates the relevance of the 2017 compilation by Harrell and Santos on public and private patriarchy as an explanative approach toward gender inequality and marriage politics. The second part analyses the predicaments of leftover and divorced women, which is followed by a close examination of how both categories of women may experience relationships with foreign men. In the last part, there is an analysis of how Chinese women interact with western men and what that says about gender and racial differences. This study draws from a pool of evidence, published interviews, media reports, and printed ethnographic studies, and merges these diverse sources into a general framework demonstrating the complexity of gender relations, marital values, and romance in present day China.

Theoretical deliberations on modernization and romance in China

For anyone confronting the ideal of love and romance in present-day China, it is striking what a relatively new concept it is. As is well-known, in the Mao era class and familial background were key to spousal selection: love was ‘bourgeois’ and counter-revolutionary (Pan 2006). With the reform era beginning in 1978 and the dramatic economic progress China experienced, significant lifestyle changes also followed. Consumerism became an essential component of everyday life (Gerth 2010), and its promotion of feminine beauty into a valuable asset as well as a key feature of gender construction that helped create what one scholar calls a ‘libidinal economy’ (Johansson 2015). In contrast to the androgyny of the Mao period, the Communist Party state agenda in the reform era has propagated essentialist notions of femininity and masculinity. This essentialist rhetoric underwrites biological differences, casting women’s ‘natural role’ as ‘vulnerable, dependent and inferior’ (Hershatter 2007, 46) and men as active and even aggressive (Song and Hird 2014). To be sure, as Song and Hird point out in Chapter 3 of their volume, there are a variety of desirable male identities, including ‘family-oriented man’, but it is the persona of the elite white-collar male that dominates media imagery and has come to represent the ‘privileged’, and coveted middle-class prosperity with its attributes, including sophisticated consumption, educated taste, cultural pluralism, foreign travel, and so on (Song and Hird 2014, 133). This male elite also underwrites gender hierarchy. As Zheng demonstrates in her study of businessmen and officials in the karaoke hostess clubs of Dalian (Liaoning province), ‘entrepreneurial masculinity requires a hypersexualized, provocative trophy woman to monopolize, control, and objectify’ (Zheng 2012, 665). Moreover, even though most women continue to engage in employment after marriage and childbirth, it is common

for both husband and wife to see the role of the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the homemaker (Attané 2012, 10; Evans 2002).

The existence of such traditional views about gender roles at a time of rapid economic transformation invites engagement with theories about modernization and personal relationships. Works by Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim and Antony Giddens have considered how late (or second) modernity manifests itself in social conditions that dismember individuals from solidaristic bonds and reorder gender and intimate relations. They believe the late twentieth century witnessed in Euro-America an era of 'the normal chaos of love' and a 'transformation of intimacy' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1992). While the Becks view the dilemma women face of being caught between living for others and forging lives of their own, Giddens positions them as agents of change. But feminist writers have critiqued the work of all three sociologists, arguing 'that they underestimate the persistence of gender inequality, the continuing importance of intimate social bonds and the degree to which choices made [*sic*] about social life are shaped by socio-economic location' (Jackson 2011, 16; also see Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe 2003). Aside from the critique the Becks and Giddens have received from sociologists examining the 'second modernity' in East Asia (Han and Shim 2010), China experts see too the claims made by the three sociologists as invalid in the Chinese context (Zarafonitis 2017). Although China shares with other countries in Asia (Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore) late twentieth-century economic success, declining fertility, an increasingly aging population, and not least, a certain kind of masculinity publicly (and unashamedly) displayed in excessive drinking and commercial sex (Chen 2017; Osburg 2013), it is the only Asian nation which enacted a one-child policy, though since October 2015 a two-child policy is in effect. This means that women born in the 1980s are all only-children and singularly responsible for their parents' old-age welfare, and thus the bonds between themselves and their family are now ever more important than before the reform era (Zhang and Sun 2014).

Such intergenerational obligations reveal reform-era patriarchal configurations which lend credence to Confucian ideals of harmony and hierarchy that are endorsed by the Chinese party-state (Bulbeck 2009, 4). Conversely, the relative freedom Chinese young people now hold, in comparison with their parents' generation, to choose a life partner brings with it the conundrum of emotional intimacy: romance, affection, and companionship must be 'folded' into family commitment. In choosing a husband, a woman not only encounters the importance of ethical responsibility to her parents, but also her own gendered sense of self-worth in which material conditions are highly relevant: a man's appeal is measured in his salary and career prospects, and not least, his possession of a house or apartment as well as an automobile (Farrer 2014b; Jankowiak 2013; Zavoretti 2016). Ironically, it is this same bond between a woman and her parents that may drive them to push her to divorce her spouse: 'parent-driven divorce' is on the rise in China. As anthropologist Yan Yunxiang concludes in his 2015 study of this phenomenon, the

parent-child relationship has now become as important as the marital conjugal relationship among those born in the 1980s.

In their analysis of public and private patriarchy in China, Harrell and Santos caution that generalizing about intergenerational family commitment and private intimate relations is multi-faceted and multidirectional: 'the growth of an individualistic culture of dating in urban areas goes hand in hand with the continuing ability of the elder generation to influence the decisions of their adult children when it comes to marriage choices' (Harrell and Santos 2017, 7). For Harrell and Santos, patriarchy is 'a system of family and kinship that produces and is produced by gender and generational inequalities both within and beyond the domestic sphere' (Harrell and Santos 2017, 10). Their argument, that in China gender and generational dynamics in families are embedded in larger social-cultural and politico-economic structures which, on the one hand, promote marriage as a voluntary contractual relationship based on individual emotional satisfaction, but on the other hand, foster inequality in the home and workplace, challenges the western narrative of historical transformation. Because China's path to modernity did not see a decline in the significance of multigenerational family ties, the common feminist analysis of the 'clear-cut opposing shift' in western societies from 'private patriarchy' based on exploitation of women in the private sphere to 'public patriarchy' rooted in their segregation and subordination within the structures of employment and the state is not appropriate for analyzing the paradoxes of Chinese society's attitudes toward romance and marriage (Harrell and Santos 2017, 35-36n19). In this essay we consider how Chinese singleton women are subject to both kinds of patriarchy which may direct them to consider the pursuit of romance outside the Chinese familial referential framework.

China's never-married and formerly-married women

Chinese women of a certain age who have never married, usually between the ages of 25 and 35, are commonly labeled *shengnǚ* or 'leftover'. In 2007 the Ministry of Education adopted this expression and since then it has become a popular part of the Chinese vernacular (Feldshuh 2018). The online Chinese encyclopedia *Baidu baike* (Baidu encyclopedia) (2012) notes that leftover women possess 'three highs': a high education level, a high income, and high intelligence, but remain 'stuck' in their single status because they are too choosy in their choice of spouse. Prejudice against women with PhD degrees is rife: they are often called *di sanzong* (third kind of human being), meaning they are neither men nor women, and thus may be considered 'freaks' (Nakano 2015, 134). But leftover women are also one of the results of the one-child policy which in effect has empowered urban daughters to gain relatively easier access to higher education and even well-paid employment than earlier generations (Fong 2002; Yun 2016). Thus there is discrepancy between what the reform era has delivered to boost women's position in society and the hostility toward independent single women. In Chinese popular culture leftover

women are classified into age groups and labeled with progressively pejorative terminology: those between 28 and 32 are 'leftover fighters' (still with a chance to find a partner); those between 32 and 35 are 'leftover forever' while an unmarried woman between 35 and 38 is a 'leftover queen' (Ding and Xu 2015, 115).

Recent published research indicates that most leftover women want to marry but that they encounter a number of obstacles. In their search to find an ideal mate, meaning a man with similar educational background, and respectful of their material and intellectual accomplishments, they come to realize such men are in very short supply. Urban successful single men are known to delay marriage until their late thirties or even forties and will find an attractive wife in her twenties (Ding and Xu 2015, 114; Song and Hird 2014, 137; Qian and Qian 2014). Because many leftover women have achieved the same economic success as men, they challenge the patriarchal norms of hypergamy whereby a wife's income is preferably less than that of her husband. Sandy To (2015) found in her interviews with some fifty leftover women based in Shanghai and Hong Kong a common complaint that men wanted superiority in every respect – that is, a higher salary than their female partner, a more elevated job title, a higher level of education, a higher ranked school of graduation, and even a larger number of holidays allowed per annum. Zarafonetis (2017) concluded from her interviews with 43 young Shanghai-based women that they were expected to conform to the ideal of monogamous marriage – 'It's like an unspoken rule' – but also to accept their husband's participation in China's sexual business culture (Uretsky 2016).

It would seem that even when a Chinese woman does find a loving man who seemingly shares her desire for an equal and intimate marital relationship, underlying patriarchal forces transform their bond. As anthropologist Roberta Zavoretti perceived in her five-year observation of one Nanjing-based woman trained as a professional nurse with the ambition to enter medical training in the United States and become a doctor, the tension to locate 'Mr. Right' overshadowed this particular goal (Zavoretti 2017). Eventually, and 'luckily' by the time she was 26 years old, the subject had found her future husband. But as Zavoretti writes, the road to eventual marital bliss was not smooth sailing. Although the fiancé did own a car, he did not possess a flat and thus her parents could not accept him because they 'would lose face.' Such machinations in marriage negotiations reflect what anthropologist William Jankowiak calls 'hot romance and cold calculation' (Jankowiak 2013). A series of intricate and complex discussions and compromises followed, with the result the couple did marry but ended up living with his parents. After the woman gave birth to their son and returned to work, the necessity for her to pool her income with her husband's and his parents became imperative while her husband continued to build his career and take on more responsibility as the principal bread-winner, and thus left domestic matters in the care of his wife and mother. Zavoretti sees this family, with the wife increasingly dependent on her mother and her mother-in-law for household help and child care and the husband focused more and more on his life outside the home, representative of the kind

of structure the state-promoted patriarchal ideal of 'harmonious society' imposes on people's visions of what is the good family life in which a wife's dutifulness is taken for granted.

The popular media underlines the importance of Chinese women's domesticity and femininity, while paying little to no attention toward female achievement outside the home. Nowadays, Chinese magazine advertising presents the modern twenty-first century woman as gentle, dutiful, as well as undemanding and decorous (Hung and Li 2006). Such qualities are taught in the growing number of Ladies' Training Institutes (*shunü peixun yuan*) established all over China which advocate the study of female 'traditions' to help cultivate lady-like demeanor and skills (Carrico 2016). A survey of the main characters of top-grossing Chinese films in the period 2002–2011 revealed that the principal female players tend to be young, sexualized, and docile (Liebler, Wei, and Li 2015). And a recent content analysis of three popular women's magazines found that the most common themes were 'delaying marriage and relationship issues' and 'dissolution of marriage,' and thus not gender discrimination (Sun and Chen 2015, 1104). Divorce too is a subject for media attention. The recent popular television series 'Think Before You Marry' (*Xiang mingbaile zai jiehun*) tells the story of two Beijing young people, both divorced in their twenties because of the betrayal of their ex-partners, who as celibate flat mates share the rental of an apartment. When their respective parents find out about their co-habitation, they feel forced to comply with their parents' demands that they marry. But once husband and wife, they discover they have little appreciation of each other's personalities and needs. In the end, however, they do make the marriage work and thus the young couple demonstrates how it is both possible to comply with the (patriarchal) claims of their parents, and to find marital happiness – a kind of patriarchal package deal, combining filial duty and individual contentment.

But such entertainment underestimates the pain and tragedy of divorce, the rate of which is very much on the rise, with as many as 3.6 million couples splitting in 2014, a rate which is double that of 2004 (*The Economist* 2016). Skyrocketing divorce rates reflect the competing discourses of wifely feminine qualities versus the realities of male expectations of married life in which fidelity may not always be a high priority (Farrer and Sun 2003; Osburg 2016). There is also a rising trend of divorce among intercultural unions, mainly Chinese women married to foreign men (Wang 2015, 68–71). The author of one of the most popular novels about marital tension 'Chinese-Style Divorce' (*Zhongguo shi lihun*), Wang Hailing when interviewed on a popular TV talk show, stated that married women should invest in self-development in order to prevent marital crises (Xiao 2014, 204n9). In the course of the TV drama (broadcast in 2004) based on this novel, the audience views how the once frumpy wife, threatened by her husband's desire for divorce, reinvents herself: she learns to dress fashionably and 'cultivate feminine qualities demanded for middle-class domestic bliss' (Xiao 2014, 116). Here we see how love

becomes a 'capacity' (*nengli*), rooted in the state-sanctioned and market reform neoliberal rhetoric of self-reliance (Farrer 2004; Xiao 2010).

In a study of divorced women living in second-tier cities, sociologist Monica Liu (2017) found that there were two major reasons for the dissolution of marriage: the husband's infidelity and/or domestic violence originating out of the man's inability to cope with job loss, alcoholism, gambling, and debt. Not only has the divorce rate risen, but also the number of single, underprivileged mothers: in 2011, the number of single mothers increased by an estimated 1.61 million (Ding and Xu 2015, 110). Statistical studies also show that most single mothers face financial hardship, with alimony not sufficient to cover the rising costs of a child's education, and medical requirements. But it is not just these economic problems that divorced women confront, it is also the trauma of marital breakdown in a society which places so much emphasis on family. The emotional turmoil and profound anxieties which divorce brings, especially with regard to the guardianship of a marriage's one child, reinforce a woman's perception of gender inequality. Chinese men are reluctant to marry a divorced woman with a child – as one interview told sociologists Ding and Xu (2015): 'It is too hard and too complicated to hold the two families together.'

Because divorcées continue to be highly stigmatized, and because male infidelity is so widespread, there has now emerged a new kind of business enterprise: the mistress dispeller. Adultery is rife in China, with 'men thirteen times as likely to stray as women' (Fan 2017, 23). For some wives unable to put up with their husband's waywardness, the mistress dispeller which is usually an agency hired by a wife to stave off the paramour for a fee, has become common in major Chinese cities. Tactics include payment, threats of exposure to family or friends, and subterfuge whereby the mistress is photographed with another man and the documentation sent to her married lover. The personage of the mistress is often portrayed in films and internet dramas as a predatory and irresistible homewrecker – the 'little third' (*xiaosan*) in the popular television series 'Dwelling Narrowness' (*Woju*) was herself a graduate of a top-ranked Shanghai university and could have well supported herself, but instead chose to live off a senior married official as his mistress (Hung 2012; Zurndorfer 2016). Cynicism about the stability of the institution of Chinese marriage pervades the mistress dispeller industry. As the owner of one agency employing some 300 persons told a reporter 'There are no enduring marriages. Only mistresses who haven't worked hard enough at tearing it apart' (Fan 2017, 23).

The foreign man option

Given the gender inequalities and mockery 'leftover' women and divorcées endure in Chinese society, many of them may now consider the option to seek romance with a foreign man. Since the late 1990s, as China became more open to overseas influences, international amorous contact has increased. Intercultural marriage in China is no longer as exceptional as it once was before the reform era (Farrer 2008, 2010). Although ethnic intermarriage is often represented negatively in

the mass media – popular stereotypes of this kind of union depicting a white man with a Chinese woman, ‘the former old, divorced and wealthy, and the latter young, pretty, and greedy’ (Hu 2016, 3), as in the case of the billionaire Rupert Murdoch and Wendi Deng – transnational romance does offer an alternative to single women seeking love, companionship, and commitment. Analyses of official statistical data show that from 1979 to 2010 there was a significant rise in the number of marriages between Chinese nationals and foreigners, and that the majority of these marriages were between Chinese women marrying foreign men (Farrer 2008, 7). But until the beginning of this millennium these marital unions were mainly cross-border or intra-Asian rather than international (Jeffreys and Wang 2013). More recently, with China’s ever-increasing prosperity, more foreign men married to Chinese women are choosing to live and work in the PRC. And given the skewed ratios of male to female of the foreign men and women working in China, for example 392:57 in Beijing in 2007 (Nehring and Wang 2016, 3), it is not surprising that local women attract the attention of foreign men, and that romance may blossom.

Although white men do not outnumber others in the sizable foreign communities in major cities composed of Central, South, or Southeast Asian, Arab, African, Russophone, or Korean people (Pieke 2012), they have the highest status and thus the most desirability among Chinese women seeking foreign contacts. *Laowai* (literally, old outsider), as the white population in China is known, totals ca. 265,000 as a recent census counted, though it is not clear what percentage is male or female (Stenberg 2015, 39). According to Farrer, white men in the eyes of Chinese women embody western ideas of romance and sexual skills (Farrer 2010; 76), but their idealization of these men may also ‘collide’ with western men’s own Orientalist fantasies of male-dominated partnership (Farrer 2012; Prasso 2005). On the one hand, as Farrer (2010) argues, heterosexual western men may consider their having numerous short-term sexual affairs in China a means to affirm their masculinity, but on the other hand, they also find the ease with which they can acquire Chinese female partners ‘alienating’ because of their superficiality and potential for exploitation. But not all Chinese women find western men irresistible. Journalist Sheridan Prasso observed a number of Guangzhou professional women’s discussions eliminating western men as husbands. As one woman told her: ‘If you marry a foreigner [and live outside China], you have to clean your own house and raise your children by yourself,’ while another woman stated, ‘...white guys who hang around in China without real jobs looking all googly-eyed at Chinese women are really just “losers” back in their own countries’ (Prasso 2005, 24, 25). These women are probably referring to what sociologist James Farrer calls ‘middling transculturals’ (English teachers, local hire expats, recent university graduates), as opposed to ‘elite migrants’ (managers, professionals, intercompany corporate transfer migrants) (Farrer 2014a, 26). These ‘mix and match’ attitudes on the part of both western men and Chinese women – with some of the men out for a good time and most of the women in search of love and commitment – reflect the

changing dynamics of intercultural relationships in China and invite more analysis of the complexities involved in these unions.

From 1994 to 2009 Farrer conducted a series of interviews with some sixty Shanghai-based college-educated women who had dated foreign men mainly from wealthy western countries in China or abroad; he concluded that they saw international liaisons both as a way to avoid the hegemonic cultural pressures to marry and a solution to finding a spouse (Farrer 2012). But Farrer's subjects also told him that not all men, and in particular Europeans, were eager for matrimony – foreign heterosexual men in China are known to keep their options open and prefer to enjoy the sexual freedom of bachelorhood (Farrer 2014a, 28). Even foreign men married to Chinese women have the reputation of 'straying': foreign husbands, especially those who have resided in China for long periods of time, become 'spoiled' by the attention that young Chinese women lavish upon them and thus extramarital sex was not uncommon (Farrer 2008, 16). Ethnographer Phiona Stanley researching North American and UK heterosexual men teaching English in Shanghai, observed that they become 'superheroes' for local women who attribute a certain authenticity about them that Chinese men seem to lack. While her male subjects reported increased personal and sexual confidence, they also experienced tension from ethical struggles over peer-sanctioned and locally expected behaviors (Stanley 2012).

Research on foreign men living in China with their Chinese wives is still limited, but the results of one study demonstrates the complexities of such marital life. Intergenerational dynamics between the wife's family and the western husband bring issues of intimacy and private space into the scope of the ideal of 'Confucian harmony'. Sociologists Nehring and Wang discovered in their 2016 study of transnational couples in Beijing that filial piety was a key issue in family life because this concept defines intergenerational bonds and relationships. Their research also indicates that in many cases to the relief of the Chinese woman's parents, that she had finally married, and was no longer a 'leftover woman' outweighed the disadvantages of a foreigner son-in-law. Once a child is born, however, the tensions between the woman, her husband, and her parents may evolve. Domestic roles change as the wife's parents, and in particular those who live with their daughter and husband, may view the transnational couple's child rearing practices and even spending habits not to their liking. Nehring and Wang conclude that while the wife will do her best to accommodate her parents' wishes to demonstrate her respect and loyalty to them (i.e. her filial piety), her husband now sees her in a new role, that is, as a mediator 'holding the whole thing together'.

For those 'leftover women' who leave China to study, or to work abroad and then begin a relationship with a foreign man, they too may encounter difficulties. In a series of interviews with Asian women, including Chinese, who lived outside their home countries during 2006–2008, sociologist Youna Kim found her Chinese informants with western partners complaining about the inequalities they felt in their homes, at work, and the general impression of status-loss abroad (Kim

2011, 87–89; see also Constable 2003). They grumbled to Kim about everyday encounters in London where people in general were not appreciative enough of their professional skills, but most of all these women worried about the social networks they still did not have in their new country of residence. Some told Kim about their British husbands' expectation that domestic responsibilities such as cooking belonged to the wife's daily tasks, and thus gender inequality was a reality, even in a different geographical setting. In the first book-length study of Chinese-British intermarriage, sociologist Yang Hu examined Chinese-British intermarriage, mainly Chinese women wedded to UK men and living in Britain (Hu 2016). His study reveals how the negotiation of gender identities and roles at home and at work are entangled in different sociocultural and familial systems. In those families where the Chinese wives carried on their careers in Britain after leaving China with their husbands, as opposed to those marriage-migrant women who became 'bananas', that is stay-at-home housewives relying on other 'bananas' for social networking, homogamy and shared responsibility for household duties dominated couple dynamics. Hu considers the 'banana' group emblematic of traditional wifely virtue and 'the good old days' when British husbands endorsed (or even expected) their partners to stay at home as full-time homemakers. As such, these house-keeping wives may have escaped from the burden of gender inequality in China, but they are in fact reproducing the ethos 'marriage is more important than career' in the UK.

With the spread of internet facilities in regions outside China's large cities, 'escape from the country' has become a possibility for women of whatever marital or economic status, including divorcées (Liu and Liu 2008). In her studies of internet dating between Chinese women and western men, Monica Liu observed that the portraits of both genders conveyed by Chinese match-making agencies to their clients correspond to marketed images of Chinese femininity and western masculinity. The women are hyper-feminized to conform to existing stereotypes of Asian women in the western media as erotic, exotic, and submissive (Liu 2015), while the western men are rendered as caring, family oriented, and worthy of marrying despite their lack of wealth (Liu 2017). The women here become consumers of potential happiness, after having experienced adultery, divorce, and age discrimination. The agencies advertise the western men as 'morally superior' to the materialistically 'rich' but spiritually 'poor' Chinese businessmen who are prone to age-stereotyping and mistress-keeping (Liu 2017, 18). The reality of such a union based on false premises, however, may prove disastrous in the long term, as shown in the 2013 comedy film 'Seeking Asian Female' in which a late middle-aged twice-divorced American man and a thirty-year old Chinese woman with limited English skills, meet on the internet, quickly marry, and then face up to and unlearn the stereotypes made about them. In a series of studies on international marriages involving Asian women and American men, Nicole Constable writes about the 'cartographies of desire' in which women search for modern husbands and men seek traditional wives, a situation that ultimately does not support the chances

for harmonious and enduring marital happiness (Constable 2003, 2005, 2007). She also cautions in her 2007 study 'Love at First Site' that internet matching is not really a substitute for face-to-face meeting, a notion which deserves further attention.

Face-to-face in China: Chinese women, western men, and western women

Face-to-face contact between Chinese women living not only in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou, but also in China's second or third-tier cities, and privileged white western males temporarily resident there is now also becoming more common. But as Lehmann indicates in her 2014 study of expatriates in Xiamen (Fujian province), the intricacies of navigating gender and racial differences may seem overwhelming for both the foreign men and the Chinese women. In this arena, notions of 'western-ness' and masculinity, as well as 'western-ness' and femininity, are constructed vis-à-vis perceptions of Chinese femininity. Lehmann found in her interviews with westerners that gender was a racial category linked to perceived values that ultimately reinforced the role of western men as dominant and authoritative, a discourse which the western women living in Xiamen underscored in their perceptions of Chinese women whom they considered 'passive, subservient, and exotic' (Lehmann 2014, 117).

Chinese women who are at an age for courtship and marriage are known to engage in what is known as *sajiao* behavior whereby they 'coo in a baby voice, bat their eyelashes or pout using big puppy eyes' (Qiu 2013, 232). Farrer (2002) considers *sajiao* a subtle strategy for women to manipulate the desires of men, but it is also a kind of behavior to which Chinese men respond favorably, integral to dating and courtship scripts. Linguistic analysis of women engaging in *sajiao* manifests how their voices emphasize 'natural and artificial feminine qualities, giving an impression of tenderness and warmth without any trace of authority' which lends support to their subordinate position to men, at least in principle (Farris 1994). Farris concludes that *sajiao* may be considered a tool of manipulation for women to gain power over men. According to Qiu Zitong's 2013 study of this concept, the literal meaning of *sajiao* is to incite tenderness by childishness in order to be coquettish.

Given the frequency Chinese women perform *sajiao* in their interaction with western men, it is not surprising western women complained to Lehmann that their experiences in Xiamen left them feeling 'desexualized'. They also sensed Chinese women in contact with western men encouraged the stereotype of western women as aggressive and asexual. Lehmann observed that many western women considered white male relationships with Chinese women to be 'gender oppressive, repressive, and exploitative', while many of her western male interviewees saw their association with Chinese women as progressive, i.e. they were 'saving' them from the tyranny of Chinese gender relations (Lehmann 2014, 129). Many of these themes, including married white men 'protecting' Chinese ladies

from Chinese men, are the foci of Tony Parsons' novel *My Favourite Wife* (2008) which narrates how a happily married British lawyer based in Shanghai with his family succumbs to the temptations of a Chinese woman who is a 'second wife' (mistress) of a Chinese business tycoon.

Western women's marginal position in China's 'sexual field' represents one of the anomalies in the discourse of international romance born of globalization and more open ethnic boundaries (Enguix and Roca 2015). As the 'ethnosexual contact zones' of China widen, it is white men and Chinese women who gain in these areas, and not western women. Farrer and Dale's (2014) analysis of western women living and working in Shanghai relates the difficulties that they have to establish relationships with western men, and underlines these women's strong contempt 'of the local talent...who dribble, giggle, [and gush] ooohs & aaahhs' (Farrer and Dale 2014, 153). Over time, Farrer and Dale write, some of these western women (including those who are 'trailing spouses') realize that in this environment there is a lack of moral restraint on sexuality. One of Lehmann's informants noted that in Xiamen '[western men] married or not married, wife or no wife here – they all have Chinese girlfriends' (Lehmann 2014, 130). The white men gain 'sexual capital' while the white women lose and feel increasingly marginalized, and realize that in China in the realm of male-female relations, there is what Farrer and Dale call 'moral disorientation' whereby tolerance for betrayal and infidelity heightens among both the white men and Chinese women. Thus, it seems all the more ironic that while Chinese women pursue foreign men in the hope of avoiding what befalls marriage with a Chinese man who engages in commercial sex or pursues the acquisition of a mistress (or more), they themselves become agents of polyamory (Pei 2011).

Concluding remarks

This study has focused on two marginalized groups in Chinese society, leftover and divorced women both of whom are subject to discrimination and ridicule by the mass media and even their own families. The derision and mockery these women face in everyday life, this essay has argued, is indicative of a patriarchal discourse rooted in larger social-cultural-economic structures that endorse intergenerational responsibility and duties, as well as promote gender inequality in the home and workplace. Thus, despite China's meteoric rise as a global economic super power, gender relations reveal a hybridity of old and new ideals – family responsibility and individual self-fulfillment. The pursuit of love and marital commitment cannot be disengaged from intergenerational bonds that may even take precedence over conjugal relations, as in the matter of parent-driven divorce. The one-child policy has left present-day young adults with the obligation to support the older generation as they pursue their own self-realization with regard to career and choice of marital partner.

But for leftover women and divorced women the fusion of these ideals has not been easy to achieve, with the result that the patriarchal discourse dislocates their

standing in Chinese society. Without the status 'married', they are pariahs, and potentially even a risk to the stability of the regime. Evidence based on printed interviews discussed in this study suggests that for both groups of women, love and fidelity are essential in their relations with men and that they fear that marriage with a Chinese man may not deliver these qualities in the long term. Thus, they turn to foreign (and preferably white) men as an alternative. But as the reported research conveyed in this essay has indicated, single Chinese women may present themselves in the same vacuous ways they would to a Chinese partner while the agenda of the western men they encounter may not be more than the search for a 'domestic helper' and erotic bed-partner. In such circumstances it is likely that a great deal of honest communication between the two sexes gets lost in translation as they pursue romance, with the consequence that neither man nor woman may be able to achieve genuine happiness with each other. And so, Chinese women may not be able to escape from the country.

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