

**Sandy To. *China's Leftover Women. Late Marriage Among Professional Women and Its Consequences.* Oxon: Routledge, 2015. 199 pp. ISBN 9780415723619 (hardcover).**

In a country like China, which has gone through important social, economic and political changes at a speedy pace, the institution of marriage, traditionally understood as a means to achieve procreation and social stability, has also been affected by modern views focusing on romantic love and individual autonomy. The consequence of these quick changes is that marriage and family in China may be contested fields where traditional views blend together, more or less harmoniously, with modern values. Thus, the task of finding a husband, for young women in contemporary China, could be anything but easy, as it may require compromise between personal wishes, such as pursuing a career and finding “Mr Right”, and social and family expectations requiring a woman to enter the marriage race on completion of their university studies.

Building on interviews with 50 single professional women aged 26–34, from 14 different provinces in the Greater China region, and based in Shanghai, Sandy To's book explores these contradictions by revealing the reality of late marriage amongst highly educated professional women. Commonly identified with a derogatory term, “left-over women”, these well-educated, well-paid and smart females gained public attention in the media and aroused governmental concern in China, due to the fact that, despite their “mature” age, they could not find a husband: threatening, in this way, social stability and population control.

The author, noticing that a majority of the women interviewed hold traditional values when the topics are marriage, marital roles and family, asks why there are still so many “left-over women” in China. Against popular assumptions tracing the cause of this phenomenon to women's will to prioritise professional ambitions over family, the author points out that the issue could be rooted in social rather than personal grounds, above all in the persistence of patriarchal beliefs as the basis of female and male choices in the field of marriage and family.

To reach this conclusion, the author unravels women's strategies in pursuit of their objective to get married and the outcome which may be generated by these actions. In this respect, the author identifies four main types of personalities amongst “left-over women”, which, however, are fluid and can change in the life course of an individual. *Maximisers* are those who manage to achieve both their marriage and economic goals by aiming for partners from similar backgrounds; at the other end of the scale lie *traditionalists*, the ones with the lowest chances of getting married, due to their conflicting views between their very traditional marriage values and their high economic achievements; in a more neutral position, *satisficers* may decide to compromise between career and marriage, by placing less emphasis on economic goals and choosing unconventional partnerships, for instance by “marrying down”; a last category, *innovators*, may opt for rather unique paths, for

instance companionship, which are rather uncommon even in contemporary China. A main point emerging from the analysis is that it is not the women themselves who choose to be single, but the patriarchal and gender constraints they are subject to when confronting their suitors and partners; above all, the permanence of the ideal of female hypergamy in a society in which higher economic achievements of females are not matched by equal improvement in men's achievements. In this context, as the author stresses, "if men persist in under-marrying, then the marital opportunities for exceptionally accomplished women are even further diminished" (p. 37).

This book, built on a convincing argument and on a solid sample, is definitely of great value for researchers and students alike, interested in familiarising themselves with more recent directions in women, gender and family studies with a focus on China. Of great value also is the detailed explanation of the methodological features, sampling procedures, process of designing the research questions, and informants' demographics in the appendixes of the book.

One limitation to Sandy To's compelling and insightful analysis may be identified in the broader objective of the book. As the author states, the four categories of "left-over women" and their experiences "have served to provide unprecedented partner choice solutions for highly educated professional women who have come to face challenging courtship dilemmas in modern Chinese society" (p. 160). A critical reader may wonder whether it is necessary to find a solution to the marriage problem of "left-over women". Above all, lacking any more in-depth argumentation beyond the above quoted sentence, the reader is left without clear details on what solutions are envisaged by the author. Beyond this questionable point, this book is an excellent piece of work offering an in-depth analysis of marriage, the courtship process, and gender inequality in contemporary urban China.

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