

Property Boom - China's growing gender gap: women are not just 'leftover' but left out

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The spectacular Chinese property boom is almost entirely benefiting men, while government-backed campaigns stigmatise unmarried women over 27 as 'leftover'.

Shang Wen, a 32-year-old single mother of a three-year-old boy, is a rarity in China, largely because her parents helped her buy her own home in 2004. "Real estate was not too expensive then, and my parents had no idea the market was going to take off," says Shang. Little did she know that this investment would end up paying off big time years later, giving her a degree of personal freedom that is rare for most young Chinese women, who have been increasingly left behind during the recent economic boom.

Shang admits she married her husband just a few months after meeting him because she had just turned 28. "Thirty years old is the age where you are considered a 'leftover' woman, so I was getting a lot of pressure to marry," says Shang, who studied in the UK. "I was getting older and older and there was this pressure. It's stupid, but it exists." Since 2007, when the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) [1] first described single women over the age of 27 as *shengnǚ*, "leftover", many women in China, even those such as Shang who have relatively high-paid jobs in multinational companies, have been affected by these attitudes. Far fewer women, it seems, have been able to take advantage of rising property prices in a country where only one out of 15 single women own a home, compared with one in five single men [2].

Chinese parents tend to buy homes for sons rather than daughters, but fortunately for Shang, her middle-class parents were more progressive. As soon as the couple was engaged, her partner moved into Shang's apartment. Yet the relationship soon soured and deteriorated further after Shang gave birth to their son. "My husband refused to help with any of the housework, but the last straw was that he didn't care about the baby," says Shang. At the end of 2012, she divorced him after he became violent and hit her father, giving him a black eye.

Shang's situation was helped by the fact that with a home registered solely in her name, she was able to ask her husband to move out and the divorce court allowed her to claim the home.

According to the nationwide Third Sample Survey on the Social Status of Women [3], conducted by the ACWF and the national bureau of statistics in 2010, only 13.2% of married women in China have homes in their own names, compared with 51.7% of married men. Moreover, Horizon China [4], a market research company, conducted a survey in 2012 of home buying in China's top real-estate markets - Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen - and found that although over 70% of women contribute to the marital-home purchase, only 30% of marital-home deeds include the woman's name.

This has profound consequences for women's wealth and overall well-being, particularly since China privatised public housing in 1998. The subsequent property boom has led to exponential returns on

homes. Shang Wen's home in Beijing, for example, has risen by more than 500% in value since she bought it in 2004, from 950,000 RMB (£90,000) to well over 5m RMB today.

Chinese women have largely missed out on what is arguably the biggest accumulation of residential property wealth in history, estimated by HSBC at more than £17.5tn at the end of 2013. Despite this, women often transfer all of their assets to their husband or boyfriend to finance the purchase of a home, which is then registered in the man's name alone. The reasons are complicated, but include deeply entrenched norms that the man must be the official home owner; myths that a man must own a home in order to attract a bride; and retrograde gender norms of parents who only buy homes for sons or even nephews, because they think that their daughters do not need to own property.

The extraordinary pressure on women to marry has had damaging economic consequences because so many are afraid to walk away from an unequal financial arrangement with their boyfriend or husband.

Such attitudes are leading to a new gender wealth gap in the market-reform era. Evidence is found in legal setbacks to [5] married women's property rights, a sharply widening gender income gap [6], report of an "epidemic of domestic violence" [7], as well as the orchestrated state media campaign to stigmatise single, educated women in their late 20s as "leftover" women [8].

The resurgence of gender inequality in recent years is in stark contrast to the early Communist era, when the Communist party publicly celebrated gender equality and Mao declared that "women hold up half the sky" [9]. Today, the authoritarian nature of China's one-party system has prevented the rise of an independent, large-scale, Chinese feminist movement. Regulations requiring the registration of NGOs are so onerous that feminist activists without official state support find it extremely difficult to secure funding or organise events without harassment from the authorities, while the officially backed ACWF dominates women's rights activities.

Yet some feminists have succeeded in raising awareness about women's rights in spite of political restrictions. In January, for example, a woman settled in what is believed to be the country's first gender discrimination lawsuit. The woman sued a tutoring firm that rejected her job application specifically because she was a woman. The firm told her it needed a man because the "work would include physical tasks such as changing the bottle on a water dispenser" [10]. Now that Shang is divorced, her parents are helping to take care of her two-year-old son and she is economically secure with a good job and a home worth significantly more than it did when she moved in. She is one of the lucky ones.

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P.S.

* "China's growing gender gap: women are not just 'leftover' but left out". The Guardian. Monday 12 May 2014 17.48 BST:

<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/may/12/china-leftover-women-property-boom>

* Shang Wen is a pseudonym. Leta Hong Fincher is the author of *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (Zed Books).

Footnotes

- [1] http://www.chinacsrmap.org/Org_Show_EN.asp?ID=1284
- [2] <http://www.womenofchina.cn/html/womenofchina/report/134798-1.htm>
- [3] <http://www.womenofchina.cn/html/womenofchina/report/134798-1.htm>
- [4] <http://house.ifeng.com/column/hezuo/hunfang/index.shtml>
- [5] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/world/asia/08iht-letter08.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1
- [6] <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2013-05-20/why-china-needs-a-lean-in-movement>
- [7] See, available on ESSF (article 35743), [“Private family matters”: China’s big divorce case exposes a hidden epidemic of domestic violence](#).
- [8] <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/shortcuts/2013/feb/24/leftovers-unmarried-chinese-women-25>
- [9] <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/184122-women-hold-up-half-the-sky>
- [10] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/28/china-woman-settles-first-gender-discrimination-lawsuit>