FINCHER LETA HONG, 2014, LEFTOVER WOMEN. THE RESURGENCE OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN CHINA, LONDON/NEW YORK, ZED BOOKS, 192 P.

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In this work, developed out of her PhD thesis in sociology, Leta Hong Fincher analyses gender inequalities in urban China, linking the issue of pressure on young women to get married to that of wealth accumulation through real estate investment. This original approach represents an important contribution to literature on gender relations in China.

According to the author, Chinese women’s urgent quest to find a husband by age 27, age 30, is the result of a government propaganda campaign on shengnu or “leftover women” orchestrated since 2007 and relayed by the state’s All-China Women’s Federation. In stigmatizing women who remain single beyond age 27, putting them in a specific category derogatorily named in reference to spoiled food, this problem is part of a wider resurgence of gender inequalities in contemporary Chinese society. As we know, the state birth control policy in effect since the early 1970s brought about a drastic fall in fertility rates and worked to skew the sex ratio at birth in favour of boys. This situation, according to the author, has not actually improved women’s position in society as they now have to confront a paradox: encouraged as young girls to become educated, cosmopolitan and independent, they are later subjected to heavy pressure to get married by age 30 at the latest to ensure perpetuation of the family line. Leta Hong Fincher also explains how many surrender power to their spouse-to-be during marriage negotiations, particularly when it comes to inscribing their name on the property deed for their “marital home” and therefore officially sharing ownership. She contends that in contemporary Chinese society, the inflation of real estate prices, resurgence of traditional norms, the fall in women’s participation in the labour force and a 2011 interpretation of the Marriage Law specifying that upon divorce, the couple’s real estate property belongs exclusively to the person(s) whose name(s) are on the property deed have all worked to tip gender power balances in favour of men. This deepens young women’s vulnerability within the couple, particularly those who marry young, as they are often financially dependent on their spouse.

Hong Fincher’s analysis is supported by data from interviews with 151 women and 132 men aged 25 to 30 living in nineteen different cities, who contacted her through her microblog. All interviewees are university-educated and middle class. Hong Fincher also draws on 60 in-depth interviews with 36 women and 24 men living in Beijing, Shanghai and Xi’an. And she has analysed an entire corpus of secondary literature, including media content. It is nonetheless frustrating for specialized readers that this last aspect was not given greater emphasis. In fact, there is a problem with the notes: the numbers in the endnotes refer to pages but no note numbers appear in the body of the text.

Hong Fincher begins the book with portraits of young “leftover” women. Once again, these are women with a university education or who have succeeded so well professionally that they have the financial means to purchase an apartment.
themselves. As the author explains, the official campaign targets just such independent women, glorifying the roles of spouse and mother, the aim being to bring these women back to the domestic sphere. As she sees it, the Party-State promotes marriage both to counter the risk of social instability that might result from the forced singlehood (due to the skewed sex ratio at birth) of an increasing segment of the male population, and to ensure that the most educated segment of the population will marry, with the understanding that their children, being born of "high quality" parents, will further strengthen the country’s economic position.

But as Fincher explains, returning to the domestic sphere tends to weaken these women's economic position since few own their home. This argument, central to her thesis, would certainly be stronger if supported by academic primary sources. It is hard to assess the credibility of the sources she uses given that no mention is made of either survey procedures or the number and profile of persons questioned.

Not only does the imbalance in official property ownership between husbands and wives prevent women from benefiting from the profits accruing to real estate property usually purchased in part with contributions from the woman or her family, but this in itself promotes unequal conjugal relations because it puts the women in a vulnerable position. Fincher shows how in certain cases, out of respect for or obedience to patriarchal norms, women with a higher income than their spouse agree not to put their name on the property deed, even though they contributed to purchasing or outfitting the home.

She then analyses how parents tend to help sons to the detriment of daughters when it comes to buying property; they may even ask their daughter to help a brother or male cousin purchase property. She also contends that to stimulate the economy, the state has joined forces with private companies (real estate developers and matchmaking agencies) to create and promote the myth that becoming a homeowner is necessary for all middle-class persons wishing to found a family. In a context of limited investment opportunities, home buying is an investment that works to maintain social stability and reduce the risk of social unrest by giving the population the impression that they can climb the social ladder.

Fincher also retraces developments in property ownership law for women in China since the Song period. Drawing on studies by Bernhardt (5) and Birge, (6) she shows that in the eleventh century women’s property rights were better protected than they are today. Female ownership rights have gone through periods of improvement – under Mao, for example – and erosion, such as the present period, as the author sees it. However, this ambitious chapter does not

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succeed in explaining the forces that continue to push young women to marry even before age 27 today. It says nothing about the new types of cohabitation being practiced by young adults born after 1980, or continuing pressure on women to conform to the marriage norm. The term “resurgence” in the title is also a problem since equality was never definitively reached, even during the Maoist period. (7)

Hong Fincher writes in an accessible style; her book is surely not addressed to a specialist public alone. It does the immense service of opening a window for non-specialists on the dynamics of gendered social relations among young Chinese adults born after 1980. Despite the reservations expressed above, however, it is important to highlight the wealth of material presented in the work, a book that points up the persistence of gender inequality in contemporary Chinese society, makes it tangible through interview excerpts, and explores the way Chinese women attempt to “fight back” against this kind of discrimination. It would have been interesting to compare the analyses presented here with dynamics observed in other Asian countries. (8)

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