

## Book Reviews

*Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*

LETA HONG FINCHER

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A couple of years ago, after successfully defending her PhD in a prestigious US university, a woman from Canton I had known for a number of years, then aged 26, called her mother back home to announce her news. Her mother supported her daughter throughout her studies, but her immediate response was to say “don’t tell too many people at home. That wouldn’t be a good idea.” Deflated and angry, the daughter nevertheless realized that her mother’s words addressed a reality that she, and other young women of similar age and educational attainment, were all too bitterly aware of. After long years of commitment to her educational and professional advancement, she now had to face a terrible choice: of returning to China and the stigmatized status of the “leftover woman,” or of staying in the US, distanced from close family and friends, and without any guarantee of professional stability.

To deride educated single women approaching the age of 30 as “leftover,” on the grounds that they are too accomplished to make desirable wives and too old to bear healthy children is to discriminate against women on the grounds of incredible ignorance and fear. The Chinese term, however, is not only used in popular media to taunt women who choose to defy social expectations, or by anxious parents who frequent the marriage markets that now abound in urban parks, in the hopes of finding a partner for their daughters before it is too late. The All-China Women’s Federation has launched what Leta Hong Fincher calls a “campaign” about “leftover women” in recent years which, far from applauding women’s professional and educational achievements, stigmatizes as “picky” or “perverse” women who choose to prioritize their intellectual and cultural interests over marriage and motherhood.

*Leftover Women* presents stark evidence of how state policy, popular media, the property market, match-making agencies and cultural custom collude in pressurizing young, educated and aspirational women to make marriage choices against their own best interests, whether these are emotional, social, professional or financial. Hong Fincher demonstrates how urban professional women have lost out from China’s spectacular economic development, under the effect of a combination of legal regulations and cultural practices effectively excluding them from access to China’s property ownership. Gender inequalities across a range of social attitudes and practices offer a partial explanation. Parents may be reluctant to invest in property for their daughter, preferring to support a nephew, on the assumption that their daughter’s future husband will offer her appropriate material security – stereotypically an apartment and a car. The gender income gap has widened since the 1990s, and without the resources to purchase property or to obtain mortgages on their own, many women find themselves browbeaten into agreeing to their prospective partner’s and “in-laws” demands for full leasehold rights for fear of finding themselves without a husband. Furthermore, although more and more young people are challenging conventional gender and sexual arrangements in their intimate lives, the Women’s Federation, Hong Fincher argues, only adds to the pressures on women by insisting that their proper role in life is to be wife and mother.

The chronological focus of Hong Fincher's analysis largely dates from 2007 when the Women's Federation first defined the term "leftover" (*shengnü*) women to refer to single women older than 27. Since then, sustained official media campaigns have broadened the category to include women who are just 25, emphasizing their point through reference, for example, to older women's responsibility for the increasing number of babies born with physical or mental defects. The educated older woman is attacked for her loose morals, for unrealistically high and "picky" "standards" in her choice of marriage partner, and for disrupting family and marital harmony by entering into liaisons with rich men or high officials rather than settling down into stable marital and family life. So, when she eventually wakes up to her status as "left-over," she deserves little sympathy; her plight is largely her own responsibility.

*Leftover Women* weaves startling and disturbing detail gleaned from numerous interviews, blogs, official media and newspaper reports into a narrative style which, unencumbered by the footnotes of standard academic etiquette, makes for direct – if discomfiting – reading. It exposes aspects of gender discrimination in China that are unfamiliar to the non-specialist and often – sadly – to the academically informed audience, and makes an impassioned call to combat the injustices it describes. Its empirical detail is delivered in an accessible and often compelling prose, based on informed engagement with media and online coverage of the relevant issues. But, at the risk of sounding ungenerous – and these comments are targeted at the informed researcher – the book is overambitious in its reach, resulting in inadequate analysis and sometimes imprudent generalizations which barely scratch the surface of the broader social, cultural and historical forces explaining its title. An overview (chapter four) of the shifting contours of women's inheritance and property rights since the Ming dynasty, for example, is enough to sustain the view that "there is no linear progression toward greater gender equality" (p. 138), but attention to the 20th century, and particularly the Mao era, is too schematic to explain the forces that continue to compel women to marry and bear children before they are 30, now at a time when alternative arrangements for intimate partnerships are on the increase. That marriage and the family continue to be the "basic cell of society," sustained by popular ideology ("men belong outside" and "women belong inside" (*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei*, p. 38), or that discrimination against "leftover women" may in part be explained by the government's population planning goals, provide only part of the answer. A greater consideration of the history of the People's Republic of China, would have revealed a genealogy to the "leftover women" phenomenon that not only includes the "30-year-old female PhD holder" of the early to mid 1990s, but uninterrupted discursive expectations that being a wife and mother – before the age of 30 – defines women's proper role in adult life, dating back to the early years of the People's Republic, and before. In turn, chapter five examines shocking evidence of the extent of intimate partner violence in China, focusing on the sexual and domestic abuse of women by their husbands, and on the vulnerability of women to abusive husbands who have control of their marital property. However, references to UN data revealing that "one half of men in its Chinese survey had used physical or sexual violence against an intimate partner" (p. 146) moves the debate about gender and sexual discrimination into territory far beyond the remit of this book.

Gender discrimination in China in recent years has not featured prominently in media discussions about China's transformation. If mentioned, it has invariably been to suggest that gender equality will necessarily follow women's improved access to educational and professional opportunity. Hong Fincher's book is powerful reminder that urban, educated status is not enough to tackle the embedded and widespread character of gender inequality in contemporary China, any more than it is

anywhere else. It is an equally powerful reminder of the threat to commonly held gender assumptions and practices – entrenched in official discourse and policy, legal and economic practice, social and cultural obligations – represented by women’s increasing social, political and economic leverage. As an inquiry into the political economy of gender discrimination in China, *Leftover Women* is an important and innovative study, well deserving of the publicity it has already received, as well as more to come.

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*Civil Society under Authoritarianism: The China Model*

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Over the last decade, the rising number of civil society organizations (CSOs) across various issue areas in China has led to a mini-boom of academic studies on the topic. What began as a literature comprised of rich ethnographies, focusing on a small number of organizations (or those individuals who lead them) has expanded into one that encompasses larger-N, theoretically driven studies. This is especially true for political scientists in China studies who have written on the topic in recent years. Jessica Teets’s wonderful book, *Civil Society under Authoritarianism*, is both an interesting and important contribution to this still nascent literature.

Teets’s research is motivated by a clearly articulated puzzle: why do CSOs, some of which are notoriously antagonistic, exist in authoritarian polities such as China? While other scholars have tackled similar questions, through extensive interviews and careful process tracing in four locales (Beijing, Jiangsu, Sichuan and Yunnan) she arrives at a different, although not necessarily contradictory, answer: while state–society relations in China were once corporatist in nature they have evolved into “consultative authoritarianism,” a term purposefully rich with paradox. She shows how, due in large part to unfunded mandates from Beijing, local officials have relied upon CSOs to help govern. She highlights how civil society in authoritarian contexts acts as a feedback mechanism both on citizen dissatisfaction and on how well (or poorly) policies work.

Although a key causal factor in the rise of CSOs, this does not entirely explain the puzzle and it is here where Teets’s book shines: she posits an explanation of rational “policy learning,” where government policies can be changed through direct experience with civil society and observation of similar dynamics in other authoritarian regimes. Hers is a story both of civil society empowerment – a departure from what she correctly describes as a predominance of “victim narratives” in studies of civil society in authoritarian polities – and the possibility of a cooperative and productive relationship with authoritarian governments; civil society is not just a partner in governance, but a force in making better, more effective policies.

While the introduction posits the idea of consultative authoritarianism and policy learning, chapters one through four represent the book’s rich, empirical core. Chapter one outlines the political and economic conditions that have given opportunity for CSOs to exist in China at all, and how their presence has provided policy learning for government officials. With a long view of history, she shows how decentralization forced local officials to search for innovative policies, thus affecting civil society development. Chapter two draws the focus on Beijing and Yunnan, the two sites