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Editorial

## Left Behind? The Status of Women in Contemporary China

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### Abstract

The status of women in China has deteriorated markedly since 2006 relative to other countries, according to the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index. Taking a longer view, the position of women has greatly improved since the founding of the People's Republic of China but, after the 'opening up' of the economy, the logic of the market and the legacy of patriarchy have worked to the detriment of women. After briefly reviewing trends in China's economic, demographic and social development, this editorial follows the structure of the thematic issue in focusing on the processes which may have caused women to slip behind. Socio-economic and political factors are considered first before focusing on the impact of unprecedentedly large scale migration. The circumstances and experiences of women 'left outside' mainstream society are explored next before reflecting on the lives of women left behind in poverty.

### Keywords

China; economic development; employment; family; gender; marketisation; migration; patriarchy; poverty; women

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue "Left Behind? Women's Status in Contemporary China" edited by Robert Walker (Beijing Normal University, China) and Jane Millar (University of Bath, UK).

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## 1. Introduction

Whereas China ranked 63rd in world in 2006 in terms of gender equality, by 2018 it had slipped to 103rd place according to the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index. This issue of *Social Inclusion* is a response to this apparent decline in the relative status of women in China, the intention being to better understand its significance and the extent to which this reflects the lived experience of modern Chinese women.

For many readers, China will be mostly understood through the lenses of the Western media and Western scholarship, lenses that inevitably bring a certain distortion to the image. The mainstream media are prone to seeing China as something of a mystery, a waking giant, being at once exotic, inscrutable, backward and communist, a suppressor of human rights, the source of SARS and now of Coronavirus (Covid-19). Increasingly,

too, China is presented as a threat to Western hegemony: as an economic competitor that does not play by western rules, a political force that challenges western influence, signing countries with the minimum of fuss and obligation into its growing sphere of influence through the Belt and Road Initiative and, potentially, as a military rival, a nuclear power with proven competence in space and missile technology and with the highest annual spending on weaponry after the USA.

In terms of scholarship, China is often viewed as different, the exception or the interesting case (Oya, 2019; Whyte, 2020; Wu & Wilkes, 2018), a position sometimes similarly adopted by Chinese scholarship (Ho, 2014; Callahan, 2014). Arguably the oldest continuing culture, uniquely imbued with Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, it is frequently characterised as a society that is held together by shame rather than by guilt (as in Judeo-Christian cultures) and ruled through deference to

leaders who are expected to be virtuous (Ho, Fu, & Ng, 2004). While Chinese schools recount sacrifices made by patriotic ancient warriors whose heavily restored tombs are centres of tourism, the humiliations of the nineteenth century at the hands of Western powers and the brutal Japanese occupation in the 20th century are nadirs against which the Chinese Communist Party marks the national revival. But the New China, beginning in 1949 with the founding of the People's Republic of China, is effectively two new Chinas: one Marxist-Leninist under Mao Zedong, albeit with the peasantry rather than the proletariat as the nominal revolutionary force; the other, beginning in 1978 under Xiaoping Deng, a socialist market economy with so-called 'Chinese characteristics.' Both phases of New China are typically perceived in opposition to capitalism, individualism and western notions of freedom. The excesses of the first period, the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution, are often contrasted against the seldom questioned benefits of democracy, while the achievements of the second period, the unprecedented rate of economic and technological development, the successful assault on poverty, mass migration and urbanisation are said by China's critics to have come at the price of universal state surveillance and lack of individual freedoms.

In contrast to much of what has gone before, the contributions to this issue do not view China from outside but from within. Moreover, many of the studies presented here begin with, or are reliant on, accounts of ordinary lives, using qualitative methods to get close to the lived experience of women in a range of circumstances and situations. Consequently, we see much similarity between women in China and women elsewhere as they seek to renegotiate their multiple roles in rapidly changing times. We see too: the strong influence of patriarchy; the conflict between labour market expectations and social expectations as to who should nurture children and care for the old; the impact of migration that breaks bonds, offers freedoms but denies security and a sense of place; the impact of modernity that requires the forging of new identities and which can exacerbate tensions between generations; and the strength of traditional expectations that provide the continuity of culture, morphs newness into old and imposes limits on what is possible.

## 2. Rapid Change

All these tensions and challenges are set against the historically unprecedented rate of social and economic change represented by the two phases of New China—first, Marxist-Leninist, then, a socialist market economy. Still largely feudal in 1949, the basic law implemented by People's Republic of China established that year stated:

The People's Republic of China shall abolish the feudal system which holds women in bondage. Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational and social life. Freedom of mar-

riage for men and women shall be put into effect. (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 1949, Article 6)

But the policies that followed were far from stable and thus somewhat contradictory for women. Legislation enacting these principles in 1950 triggered high rates of divorce that resulted within a few years in moves to regulate divorce and to promote family life. Likewise, when women entered the labour market in large numbers and the economy could no longer absorb them, they were encouraged to stay at home. Then, with the Great Leap Forward in 1958, they were commandeered to work in the fields vacated by men who had been recruited into new industrial ventures. And so, it remained, with female labour participation at 'saturation levels' until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1975 and the so-called 'reform and opening-up' (*gaige kaifang*) of the economy in 1978 (Li, 2000). But in that more open economy, female participation had fallen back to 73% by 1990 and by 2019 had dropped to 61%, albeit still much higher than in either South Korea or Japan, countries that share a Confucian heritage.

Since the founding of the New China in 1949, income per capital GDP in real purchasing parity terms has increased by a factor of 21 reflecting the transition from a post-invasion, economically stagnant agricultural society to a post-industrial economy accounting for almost a sixth of the world's annual production and on the cusp of being designated high income status by the World Bank (Visualcapitalist, 2019). Most of this growth occurred after the economic opening-up; whereas per capita incomes merely doubled in real terms from 1949 to 1985, they have increased eight-fold since then. Thus, the transition from the Maoist period to market socialism brought with it profound economic and social change. Labour was shifted from the public to the private sector with the 'opening-up' of the economy; the numbers employed by state-owned enterprises more than halved between 2002 and 2019 from 44% to less than 20% (Guluzade, 2019). People migrated *en masse* from rural China to the towns with the population living in cities tripling from 20% in 1980 to virtually 60% in 2019. A high-speed rail network of some 30,000 kilometres has been built since 2008 and 28% of national energy needs are now met from renewable sources. Poverty, based on the US\$1.90/day standard has been cut from about 40% in 2000 to almost nothing today, albeit in 2015, 377 million were still living on less than \$5.50/day, the World Bank's target threshold for high middle-income countries like China (Walker, in press).

The population has almost tripled since the founding of the New China in 1949 but, unlike economic growth, much of the rise occurred during the Maoist period. China's population was 542 million in 1949 and had grown to 900 million in 1968 when the birth-rate was 3.95/100. By 1980, almost coincident with the introduction of the uniquely authoritarian One Child Policy popu-

lation control measures, the birth rate had already fallen to 2.20/100 (United Nations, 2020). In 2019, four years after the policy was abolished, with a rapidly aging population of 1.4 billion, the birth rate was only 1.14/100 with official revisions suggesting that it may be as low as 1.05/100 (L. Zhang, 2020). The sex ratio at birth, currently about 115 boys are born for every 100 girls, is the highest in the world, probably an unintended consequence of population control measures and Confucian notions of filial piety (Zhou, 2019). Men exceed women by about 33 million which has profound implications for relationship building and marriage and, given current gender roles, society's capacity to provide care for the elderly and for children (NBSC, 2019). 241 million Chinese (17.3%) are aged over 60 and demographic projections suggest that by 2050 nearly 35% will be aged over 65 (Chi, 2018; United Nations, 2020). Ignoring income forgone, the estimated cost of rearing a child to the age of 17 is 273,200 yuan in the city and 143,400 yuan in rural areas (Ma, 2020). While migrating parents are increasing trying to take their children with them to cities, almost 70 million children are still left behind in villages to be looked after by others, usually by their grandparents (Tong, Yan, & Kawachi, 2019).

It is, therefore, in this context of colossal social and economic change that the authors explore the status of women in contemporary China. The implicit question that they all, to a varying degree, address is to what extent and in what ways have women benefitted from these changes if, indeed, they have. Have they, as implied by China's decline in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index, been left behind at least in relative terms? While it was the findings of the 2018 World Economic Forum report that provoked this thematic issue, it is worth noting that China has fallen three more places in the 2020 report and is now placed 106 out 153 (WEF, 2020).

In answering these questions, the twelve articles are grouped into four sections each with a more refined take on the question of being left behind: (1) left behind overall, (2) through migration, (3) outside mainstream society and (4) in poverty.

### 3. Women Left Behind?

The first two commissioned articles directly address the question of whether women in China have been left behind in economic, social and political terms over different time periods. Chen and He (2020) dissect the *Global Gender Gap Report* (GGGR) to determine the reasons for China's downward trajectory between 2006 and 2018. The story is complex but while new countries have been enrolled in the GGGR since it started, many with less gender inequality than China, this was not the major reason. Rather against the set of measures that constitute the GGGR, the status of women has simply not improved as quickly as it has in many other countries including China's East Asian neighbours.

Chen and He (2020) argue that the choice of measures is important. The GGGR indexes the gender gap with respect to economic participation, opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. While the original 112 countries included in the first GGR study in 2006 improved on three of the four dimensions, the exception being health and survival where equality had already been virtually attained, the position of women in China appears to have actually worsened on this dimension and not to have advanced as quickly on the others. However, the authors point out that, since China's imbalanced sex ratio at birth is heavily weighted on the health index and affects the gender balance, it is counted twice. This, they suggest, is the main reason why China ranks much higher (39 out of 189) on the UNDP's alternative Gender Inequality Index which uses the maternal mortality ratio and the adolescent birth rate to measure health inequality rather than the sex ratio at birth.

While these criticisms are valid, such strong sex male selection at birth must point to a profound undervaluing of girl children and women in Chinese society. This is even more notable given the strong ideological endorsement of gender equality at the foundation of the People's Republic of China. Moreover, this commitment is maintained in the rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party and the aspiration to increase the proportion of women in the national and provincial bureaux is enshrined in election law. However, progress since 2006 is notable for its slowness in terms of representation in political bureaux and is virtually non-existent at ministerial level. Moreover, while the measures of political empowerment used in the GGGR have been criticised as elitist (Lin, 2018), representation of women is even worse at village level, where government most clearly intersects with daily life, something Yang (2020) again notes in her article.

The article by Yang (2020) complements that of Chen and He (2020), taking a longer time perspective and drawing on official statistics and survey data to provide an analysis of women's progress in the labour market and in politics. What we find is a story of two halves. Viewed from the perspective of 70 years, the progress towards gender equality has been substantial but with the arrival of a socialist market economy progress in many respects has stalled. At the birth of the People's Republic of China, the government sought to distinguish itself by ridding China of its 'feudal' legacy of which patriarchy and the virtual subjugation of women were characteristic elements. As Yang here describes, 'during Mao's era women laboured shoulder-to-shoulder with men' and, though this often meant acting like men while also carrying the burden of childrearing and housework, it brought social and economic status. The films of the era, such as Cui Wei's, *Mountain Flower (Shanhua)*, released in 1976 often present women as workers' and village leaders. Moreover, women's incomes did rise significantly relative to men's reaching 79% in 1978 and 84% in 1988. But

with marketisation, by 2014 this figure had fallen to back to 66% in cities and 55% in the rural areas.

This fall in women's incomes relative to those of men occurred during a period in which rising educational attainment meant that the proportion of women employed in high status jobs doubled. Yang (2020) attributes this apparent contradiction to profit-seeking behaviour in the new era of a market economy. Because of maternity and childcare responsibilities, women have been seen as an expensive resource and have therefore been more prone to being laid off in recessions and less likely to be rewarded with promotion; women, the author concludes, are disadvantaged when resources are scarce. Women were disproportionately affected by closure of state owned industries and by the state's withdrawal from the provision of childcare which both contributed to the fall in female labour market participation since marketisation noted above.

Moreover, the predominantly male voice of profit from industry cannot be effectively answered by women in government. This gives lie to Mao's rhetoric of women holding up half the sky since, while the proportion of women in government positions has increased four-fold since 1978, this was from a very low base. As Chen and He (2020) show, China lags most other countries in women's access to political power. Yang explains this in terms of limited access to political positions and a reluctance to take these up because women feel the need to prioritise their "reproductive roles as dutiful wives" concluding that "gender equality which is now seen to be conditional on the premise of not harming the interests of men" (Yang, 2020, p. X).

Zhong and Peng (2020), in the third article of this opening section, show how the policies associated with marketisation, notably the abandonment of collectivist notions of childcare, have divided the interests of women. Throughout the era of the socialist market economy Chinese women have been expected to continue in their twin roles of worker and mother. For many women this has proved to be impossible. For rural migrants, it has long been accepted that it is grandmothers, and to a lesser extent, grandfathers back in the villages who have assumed the role of 'mother,' taking on 24-hour childcare for indefinite periods. However, the authors demonstrate, through evidence from a qualitative study conducted in Guangzhou, a city emblematic of the market economy, that grandmothers similarly facilitate the careers of middle-class Chinese women in urban economies. With a weakening of the patrilineal tradition of intergenerational support in urban China, maternal grandmothers are playing an increasingly important role in the adult lives of their daughters as mothers.

The round-the-clock care provided by live-in grandmothers is cheap for parents compared to the cost of employing a nanny or buying private childcare; money seldom changes hands although parents salve consciences by giving presents and paying for holidays. Parents also perceive grandparental care to be safer and more agree-

able despite frequent intergenerational disputes over styles of childcare. But, Zhong and Peng (2020) argue, the cost of mothers' economic freedom is borne by grandmothers whose own personal needs are scarcely recognised. Intriguingly, too, the authors argue that, while the success of marketisation has been facilitated by the preparedness of grandmothers to support employment of their daughters and daughters-in-law, their reluctance to continue in this role is likely to limit the success of the current two-child policy.

#### 4. Left behind through Migration

China's economic growth since 'opening-up' has been underpinned by the world's largest ever rural-urban migration: 288 million rural migrants, 35% of them women, comprise more than a third of the working population (CLB, 2019). Such migration was probably never envisaged by Xiaoping Deng and the architects of economic reform. Indeed, in the earlier era, the *hukou* registration system was specifically introduced in 1958 to prevent migration to the towns for China's continuing revolution was to be led by the liberated peasantry. The legacy of the *hukou* system is that it makes most migration nominally temporary since migrants' access to welfare support is restricted to their place of origin. Access to an urban *hukou*, available to a few migrants based on education and employment status, is a highly prized asset.

The four articles in the second section emphasise that migration, although frequently driven by economic necessity, is often itself an expression of freedom and can additionally liberate migrants from the traditional beliefs and social structures that reproduce inequality including those associated with gender. However, these articles also demonstrate the power of culture and social norms to extend beyond geographic boundaries and for patriarchy to continue to constrain the freedoms of women. Particularly important is the persistence of the 'feudal' tradition of patrilocality, the wife moving to and joining the husband's family, a bride price being paid to the wife's parents by way of compensation. Fan and Chen (2020) and Yang and Ren (2020) examine the motivations and consequences for women of internal migration, while the other two articles in this section draw attention to international migration. Tu and Xie (2020) focus on out migration to the UK while Huang (2020) considers inward migration from Vietnam.

It is frequently suggested that China's rural-urban migration has evolved in particular ways over time (Duan, Lv, & Zou, 2013). Initially, it involved migration only the during slack farming seasons, then more long-term migration with children being left behind, then families reuniting in cities, and finally migration being undertaken by parents together with their children. A third of the 103 million children currently affected by migration live with their parents in cities, the other two-thirds are left behind (CLB, 2019). Fan and Chen (2020) both accept and problematise this conceptualisation of the evolution

of migration, showing, through the life experiences of two women from Anhui province, that the sequencing can apply structurally, to first and subsequent generations of migrants, but also occur within extended families. Moreover, because families cope flexibly with changing circumstances, the sequencing is not necessarily linear.

The two women that the authors follow, Yingyue and Shaun, were born respectively in 1962 and 1992 and represent two generations straddling China's economic opening-up. Yingyue was initially left behind looking after two children only migrating to the city when her own daughter left school early. Somewhat resonating with Zhong's study, she now lives in another city caring for her son's two children, her husband having returned to the village home to look after the family farm. Shaun, brought up by her grandfather, left school early, and migrated to join her parents, working in factories in Ningbo. Introduced to a man in her home village, Shaun married at 20 returning with her husband to Ningbo and his parents. She briefly went back to her home village to give birth and then returned to Ningbo providing domestic labour for her in-laws. Having a second child, Shaun moved back in her home village where, albeit longing to return to work, she cares for the children while her husband is away working in a family courier firm. In both cases, migration added to living standards but did not liberate the women from their first obligation, to care for their husbands, children and in-laws.

The in-depth accounts of the experiences of these two women are echoed in the lives of the 124 female villagers in Maple Village in Shanxi province studied by Yang and Ren (2020), 96 of whom had undertaken migrant work. These migrant women also find themselves ultimately confined by patriarchy and often by patrilocality, although their migration initially shifts power relations, first within the matrimonial home and then, more permanently, between generations. Outside the home, however, where women might want to exploit their skills acquired from migration, for example by participating in village governance, they encounter great external resistance often in the form of overt male prejudice. This perhaps helps to explain the underrepresentation of women in government noted by Yang (2020).

Most of the women in Maple village had left the village immediately after finishing school. In the city, they found work hard, often feeling exploited, but they enjoyed hitherto unknown freedoms, not least the opportunity to choose a husband. On marriage, usually with both spouses working in the city, the woman not infrequently earning more than the man, domestic chores were often shared. Moreover, parents found that their sons and daughters-in-law were contributing more than they were to the overall income of the extended family which meant collective decisions favoured the young or, at least, promoted their earning power. With one child, it was often decided that, after a short spell in the village, the woman would re-join their husband in the city. A second child tended to make this option look less at-

tractive but, caring for children back in the husband's village and unsupported as a 'foreigner' by the community, they rapidly lost their autonomy reverting to the role of dutiful daughter-in-law.

From Tu and Xie's (2020) article, it seems that even migration abroad, specifically to the UK in the case of their study, does not free women from the traditional values. Without siblings, daughters of middle-class parents are expected to perform as sons, advancing the status of the family through education and economic success, while also behaving as good daughters. Parents believe that having their daughter study abroad is an investment in the family, exchanging economic for social capital. However, in so doing parents seem to recognise that they are also taking a risk. If their daughter is too high an achiever, this may reduce the chance of her finding a 'suitable' husband, since Chinese men expect to marry beneath themselves, and becoming a good wife means supporting the husband's career rather than their own. While mothers perhaps seemed more supportive of their daughters chosen career paths than fathers, they too held to the notion that it was a good marriage that made a Chinese woman "truly successful." From the three case-studies presented by Tu and Xie (2020), it seems that daughters can do little to resist their families' expectations, "pulled back" by parents "left behind" in China.

A Chinese marriage was also the aspiration of many of the female Vietnamese migrants that Huang (2020) studied in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands defined by the Nanning/the Friendship Port/Hanoi economic corridor. While the desire to escape rural poverty is the underlying motivation to enter the borderlands, where two cultures coalesce around the goal of economic development, the migrant's motives are complex. Not so much running away, as going somewhere, Vietnamese women migrants aspire to a better life, to be enterprising and adventurous and modern. Leaving the village, they also leave pressures to marry young and become a man's chattel, they can choose their own marriage partner and a Chinese marriage perceived to be more egalitarian than in rural Vietnam. Although many rotate between village and town, these women appear, without restrictions equivalent to *hukou*, to be less bound by place. But while wages for equivalent work are higher in China than Vietnam, their limited education and gender make them vulnerable to economic and sexual exploitation and, as female migrants, to stigma and innuendo both in the borderlands and back in their villages. A Chinese husband becomes a legitimisation and a defence, symbolic of success and, ironically when set against the life experiences of women migrants in China, a manifestation of personal freedom.

## 5. Left Outside Mainstream Society

The three articles that concern women who find themselves to be on the edges of modern Chinese society are connected by the theme of intersectionality.

In their article, Wang and Liu (2020) introduce Lydia who, although becoming an outsider, is the embodiment of, and perhaps a metaphor for, China's economic opening-up. A successful voice performance student, Lydia lost her virginity on her first date with a motorbike-riding "prince," nine years older than herself. His mother, rich as the chair of a state-owned enterprise and owning an associated private company, doted on her son, buying him a karaoke club on Lydia's whim. Without entrepreneurial talent or knowledge of the commercial sex industry, Lydia and her boyfriend enjoyed the club's profitability with heroin use being demonstrative of their wealth and success, and multiple abortions easy to pay for. Everything changed when first, her boyfriend's mother was jailed for corruption and secondly, he was imprisoned for sheltering prostitution and carrying a gun. Heroin addiction put her in frequent contact with police, repeated courses of drug-rehabilitation failed, a baby was born and died of neglect, and Lydia contracted HIV/AIDS, a shock that seemed to "save her," allowing her to begin a new life benefiting from China's new treatment system, the 'Four Frees and One Care.'

Lydia, then, was caught in the maelstrom of marketisation, freed from convention and family to play roles as lover, entrepreneur and extravagant consumer, she lacked a social or moral compass and could not escape becoming a victim of a patriarchal society that legitimates male exploitation of women. Taking Lydia's experience as a metaphor for China's socialist market economy, it is notable that she was "saved" by state intervention.

China's sex industry is also the context for Ding's (2020) article in which she argues that women should not be reduced to the label 'sex-worker,' preferring the term *xiaojie*. In ancient China, *xiaojie* was the polite form of address for unmarried daughters of rich families and has become associated with prostitution only in the last decade. It is the term that Ding found was preferred by women engaged in the sex industry in the economically successful Pearl River Delta area of southern China. The author likens what *xiaojies* do to the self-employment, informal employment and temporary employment that has increasingly replaced formal work in the public (*gongzuo*) and private (*dagong*) sectors. *Xiaojies*, as second or third generation migrants, generally unskilled, poor and stigmatised, seek to avoid the exploitation that they believe factory work to be, and to identify themselves with their portfolio of roles: singer, dancer, girlfriend, confidant, networker, businesswoman and *chulai*. The term *chulai*, literally meaning to 'come out,' seems to connect to the experience of the migrant women in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands: rural woman surviving and seeking to prosper in the modern city.

In the third article in this section, Pei, Zheng, and Gao (2020) explore the intersection of gender and disability, or more strictly of patriarchy and ableism, and the potential of the internet to enhance social capital and earning power. While the five cases discussed cannot meaningfully represent the approximately 8.5 million

disabled women of working age in China, most of whom have not completed a full school curriculum, they do illustrate the power of social media to engage. With assistive technology, the internet has the capacity to limit the impact of physical, mobility and sensory disabilities, the five respondents all being able to generate meaningful amounts of income as salespeople and through streaming activities. Pointedly, though, most use the internet to hide their disability rather than to challenge prejudice, in part because they have been harassed on-line and accused of being "internet beggars." While China aspires to promote "high-quality development of employment for disabled people in the new era," much clearly needs to be done the change public attitudes and welcome disabled people into mainstream society (Xinhua News, 2019).

## 6. Left Behind in Poverty

China is politically committed to eradicating extreme, rural poverty in 2020, the outcome of a concerted campaign pursued particularly rigorously under the personal leadership of Chairman Xi, Jinping since 2015. Currently it is thought that the 14th Five Year Plan will acknowledge the existence of urban poverty for the first time and introduce a measure of relative poverty. In many respects, though, as Li (2020) notes in her article on lone parenthood, poverty alleviation policy is gender blind.

With the population and family planning law imposing fines on women who give birth out of wedlock (called 'social support expenditure'), most lone or single mothers, of whom there are 20 million in China, are divorcees or widows. This was also true of the author's sample of 42 women studied in Zhuhai in the Pearl River Delta. Single mothers are particularly prone to poverty due to China's patriarchal norms and the government's emphasis on familial rather than collective support. The author found that financial hardship was acute in her sample, women's careers were truncated, stress-related physical and mental health disorders were prevalent, and social relationships and social capital were severely constrained. As daughters, their education had been less prioritised by their parents while, as mothers, they were expected to prioritise childcare above career. This meant that, combined with gender inequalities in the labour market and only expensive childcare being available, their earning power was extremely limited. As divorcees, lone mothers could be considered as failed wives, disappointing their parents and rejected by in-laws, they felt required to make amends by devoting their lives to child-rearing. They had little time to socialise and to find a prospective partner and, in addition, their prospects for re-marriage were low as, with children, they presented a double liability. Li (2020) argues persuasively for policies that recognise the negative impact of China's familistic culture and its negative impact on lone mothers.

The final article by G. Zhang (2020) is especially apposite in that, while Li (2020) discusses poverty result-

ing from the loss of a husband, he explores marriage migration as a strategy by which women escape poverty. Transactional marriage, in which a bride is effectively sold to relieve the poverty of her natal family, was prevalent in China in the 1980s and in earlier eras and possibly still exists. However, the author uses the term ‘marriage migrant’ (*waidi xifu*) to describe an outcome matching the aspirations of the Vietnamese migrants observed by Huang (2020). Young women migrate for work, find husbands and stay with them in more prosperous regions of China. This change from a collective familial to an individual response to poverty might be seen as an aspect of modernity, the personal ‘I’ taking precedence over the family ‘we,’ with the natal family gaining little save a mouth less to feed. However, it also reflects traditional values of patrilocal and the wife’s expected allegiance to her in-laws.

What the author concludes is that, while marriage migrants may escape absolute poverty, they rarely escape relative poverty, the stigma of being a migrant being enough to deny them the chance of marrying an economically successful local. Instead, the best that they can hope for is to have a son who is able to marry well as a result of the hard work and sacrifice of his mother and father. Moreover, despite trying to socially integrate and to be accepted, the women that the author interviewed were seldom able to overcome the shame of once being a poor migrant looking for a husband. If not left behind, socially they are put aside.

## 7. Conclusion

The articles in this issue confirm that the status of women was much enhanced following the founding of the Peoples’ Republic of China but that since the opening-up of the economy, the logic of the market has worked against women. Profit maximisation does not value non-marketable work and the transfer of child and social care back from state to family has increased the burden on women. While it can be debated whether the indicators used in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index discriminate against China, and thereby understate the status of women in China, women are undeniably massively underrepresented in senior positions in business and throughout government. Without access to the political decisions that matter, women will continue to be left behind and left outside in China.

In reading and interpreting Chinese scholarship, it is helpful to note some conventions. Much scholarship is normative, interpreting the world from a Marxist-Leninist perspective and increasingly through the thoughts of Chairman Xi Jinping. Empirical work, such as that represented by articles in this issue, is comparatively rare. Chinese culture is to believe that China is the first among equals or, indeed, that China is a model that it is for others to follow. Direct criticism of academic work is unusual; this is to avoid inflicting loss of face and experiencing it by return. Direct criticism of government pol-

icy is even more unusual; academics are expected to be moral and to believe what is politically correct. Critique of policy implementation can be acceptable if it is directed towards lower levels in the administrative hierarchy. If critique is sometimes acceptable, being overtly political never is. Finally, it is an essential interpretive skill to seek and find meaning from the words that are missing.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

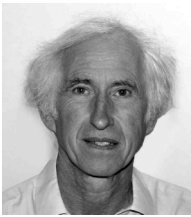
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