

## **The resurgence of 'ignorance is women's virtue': 'Leftover women' and constructing 'ideal' levels of female education in China**

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### **Abstract**

This paper considers the construction of an 'ideal' level of female education in China by reflecting on the social phenomenon of 'leftover women', and the perpetuation of this stigma by Chinese state media. It contributes an in-depth engagement with the educational dimensions of 'leftover women' through innovative discourse analysis that examines the content of one of the most popular Chinese dating shows in the last decade. This analysis reveals the role of 'experts' in preserving myths about being or becoming 'leftover', as well as the influence of family, in particular mothers, on young Chinese women's choices and self-perception. This paper argues that by attending to popular discourses and their reframing of older Chinese ideas, in particular, 'ignorance is women's virtue', we can offer qualitative insights to the relatively lower numbers of Chinese women at doctoral education levels.

**Keywords** higher education; gender; discourse; Chinese 'leftover women'; PhD

## **Introduction: as the old saying goes, 'ignorance is women's virtue'**

In 2015, Guo Yingguang's action artwork (Guo 2018) – a 'self-promotion' in Shanghai's most recognised 'blind date' spot, People's Park – attracted wide public attention. People's Park is well known as the place where anxious parents with unmarried sons and/or daughters exchange information and identify potential marriage matches for their children. As a single woman, two facts about Guo were deemed to be of specific concern: her age – 34-years-old – and her educational level – a master's graduate from a prestigious British university. In the video that she filmed with a micro-camera, a crowd of parents discussed her case in front of her as if she was an object. One of them described 'good-looking, never married' Guo as 'an apartment with a great layout'; but her age was seen to devalue the location of this apartment from the city centre to the suburbs, and her educational level was felt to worsen the situation. As another two parents commented,

Parent One (male): 'There are too many accomplished girls out there... It's not good for girls to have too much education... Master's degrees are useless; Bachelor's degrees are enough.'

Parent Two (male): 'The old saying goes, "*ignorance is women's virtue*".'

Guo is not a single case. Since the mid-2000s, urban single female professionals in their mid-20s or older have been castigated as 'leftover women' (*shengnü*, 剩女) in China (Li 2015). This sexist buzzword was formally recognised by the Ministry of Education in 2007 (Hong Fincher 2014), and has even been perpetuated by the state feminist agency – All-China Women's Federation (ACWF). In official and popular discourses, 'leftover women' have been 'pathologised as a social problem to be solved through marriage' (Li 2015, 525). Another well-known equivalent name for 'leftover women' is 'three highs women' (*sangaonü*, 三高女): high (older) age, high salary and high levels of education. Central to the 'three highs' is advanced education, which is often perceived to lead to both superior economic status (To 2013) and the delay of marriage (Qian and Qian 2014). Although 'leftover women' are not necessarily highly educated, quantitative studies have shown that highly educated women, in particular with PhD titles, are most likely to be 'leftover' (Ji and Yeung 2014). In contrast, the corresponding term 'leftover men' (*shengnan*, 剩男) has drawn much less public attention; in some popular discourses, unmarried, well-educated men have even been constructed as 'diamond bachelors' (Zhang 2020).

Contributing to this growing body of work on the social phenomenon of 'leftover women' and the perpetuation of this stigma by Chinese state media, this paper investigates how 'ideal' levels of female education have been constructed in China over time, and how age and marital status has profoundly shaped Chinese female students' educational aspirations, through concerns around being and becoming 'leftover'.

### ***Being and becoming 'leftover': understandings of a gendered social construct***

The social phenomenon of 'leftover women' has attracted increasing academic attention within China over the last decade. Some scholars have blamed pathologised 'leftover women' for reducing the number of 'normal families' and causing an 'excess' of bachelors. They believe that this may undermine social stability and even hinder modernisation progress as low marriage rates are thought to be casually linked with low workforce productivity (e.g., Wei and Zhang 2010; Tang 2010). However, drawing on demographic data, others have argued that the phenomenon itself is a false proposition. This set of scholars has situated the stigmatisation of single womanhood in the continuation of patriarchal discourses and state conservatism (e.g., Xu 2014; Zhou and Zhang 2014).

The notion of 'leftover women' has been particularly explored with a discourse lens, as this paper will do. Discourse analyses have tended thus far to focus on different sites of (re)production: asking questions of the role of the Chinese state in promoting these dismissive representations of 'leftover women' (Gaetano 2014; Hong Fincher 2014); situating the rise of the 'leftover women' phenomenon within norms around family authority and filial piety rooted in patriarchal structures (Ji 2015; To 2015); or examining how the new gender mandate of market economy essentialises women and constrains them by consumerism (Li 2015; Luo and Sun 2015). A related body of work interrogates the manifestation of these state discourses and broader socio-cultural and gendered norms within popular media, underlining how contestants in reality TV and dating shows (re)produce and negotiate concerns about being and becoming 'leftover' (Feldshuh 2018; Luo and Sun 2015).

Less work, however, examines connections between being highly-educated and the construct of 'leftover women' in depth, as this paper will do. In exploring the resurgence of gender inequality in China, Hong Fincher's (2014) book focuses on women's property rights, placing the educational dimensions of 'leftover women' within the context of backlashes by state and patriarchal discourses against the economic and educational successes of (particularly) urban, middle-class, Chinese women. She pinpoints the framing of these

women as 'leftover' in processes of state control, constructing 'neoliberal subjects' who self-govern in accordance with the priorities of the state (ibid. 29). To (2013) picks up the questions of governance within the social institution of the family, reflecting on tensions between parents' support for their daughters' high educational achievements and associated economic opportunities, and persistent 'traditional' expectations for their roles as wives and mothers. In her analysis of various media, Feldshuh (2018, 40) highlights that women's educational achievement has been seen as abnormal and shameful, and illustrates that the resurgent ideas of gender stereotypes are transformed into 'tools of social policing', restricting women's aspirations.

Our paper builds on this work to make two contributions to understandings of the 'leftover women' phenomenon and its concomitant implications for young women's educational achievements. First, it contextualises the phenomenon within a longer history of sophisticated framings of 'ideal' levels as well as progression and backlash against female education in China. This offers a historical lens that is absent from much discussion of the phenomenon. We particularly concentrate on the old saying – 'ignorance is women's virtue' (*nüzi wucai bianshide*, 女子无才便是德) – exemplified in Guo's case<sup>1</sup>. As we will show, this old saying has been widely re-recorded by scholars and spread among the public over time. Although not without controversies, this 'old saying' continues to frame formal education for women as detrimental for both individuals and society (Liu 2009).

Second, we conduct an in-depth analysis of one aspect of 'leftover women' – being and becoming a young woman with a PhD – that facilitates understanding gendered experiences of education. The past two decades have witnessed 'a paradigm shift' of gender in China's higher education (Feldshuh 2018). Figures from the Chinese National Statistics Bureau show that since 2011 more than 50% of undergraduate students have been female, with similar figures at master's level. In contrast, the proportion of female PhD students has been much smaller and increased relatively more slowly, rising from 31.4% in 2004 to 36.9% in 2014 (the last figures provided by the Chinese government). Through fine-grained attention to constructs of female PhD students and academics within one of the most popular dating shows in China, this paper elucidates resistance and (re)inscription of conservative ideas

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<sup>1</sup> We have translated 'wucai (无才)' as 'ignorance'. But as we shall illustrate later, the connotation of 'wucai' is sophisticated and ever-evolving. It does not simply denote illiteracy or the lack of knowledge, but includes a notion of self-pursuit and self-awareness. There is no direct equivalent in English.

around gender, revealing how particular elements of historical discourses have re-emerged and been re-constituted for the modern era.

### **Situating 'leftover women': a historical review of shifting constructs of the 'ideal' level of female education in China**

Since West Zhou Dynasty (1046-770BC), significant differences existed between discourses around the purposes and pedagogies of male and female education in China. For centuries, female education primarily concentrated on cultivating virtuous mothers and wives with necessary domestic skills and social ethics, to be capable of managing family affairs (Ko 1994). But this does not necessarily imply the lack of, or disapproval of, literate women in ancient China. Instead, women in elite families were taught to read and write in order to better understand and embody morality in daily life. In addition to Confucian classics shared with men such as *Analects* (*Lunyü*, 论语) and *The Book of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing*, 孝经), a series of books were provided specifically for women, for example, *Biographies of Notable Women* (*Lienü Zhuan*, 列女传) and *The Book of Women's Indoctrination* (*Nüjie*, 女诫). Particularly, Tang Dynasty (618-907), a prosperous dynasty with open spirits, witnessed a steady increase of women pursuing writing and arts (Lee 1995).

A setback of women's status emerged in Song Dynasty (960-1279), to which the origin of 'ignorance is women's virtue' can be traced (Chen 2015). For instance, Sima Guang (司马光, 1019-1086), an influential Confucian official, once stated that 'it is not appropriate to teach women making poems and playing vulgar music' (cited in Chen 2015, 147). However, he was in favour of women being educated to read Confucian classics. Rather than illiteracy and no knowledge, 'ignorance' specifically indicated the paucity of literary and artistic talents that were believed to lead to the loss of virtue.

The perception of causal relationship between literary and artistic talents and the loss of virtue was further strengthened in the late Ming Dynasty, in accordance with the growing prevalence of conservative Confucian doctrines. The exact sentence of 'ignorance is women's virtue' did not appear until the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in Chen Jiru's (陈继儒, 1558-1639) dictum collection. Chen insisted that 'literate women who understand the principles of righteousness are virtuous; however, there are not many of them. Others enjoy reading poems and novels, which could raise immoral thoughts... Thus, they are rather remaining illiterate'. For him and many other conservative Confucian scholars, women with literary and artistic talents were more likely to be liberal and challenging, with high self-awareness and self-pursuit. This was

worsened by the fact that many female singers and courtesans, virtually seen as prostitutes, were literate; some of them were even famous for poem-writing. Talented women were often deemed as 'a moral stigma', treated 'as though they were loose-living' (Lee 1995, 354). Moreover, the first half of the dictum – 'virtue is men's talent'<sup>2</sup> (*nanzhi youde bianshicai*, 男子有德便是才) – as recorded in Chen's book has been neglected in the circulation and (re)interpretations. Liu (2009) argues that the emphasis of this dictum shifted from 'reinforcing the status of virtue for men and women' to 'appraising the ignorance of women' among the public even until nowadays.

Nevertheless, as many scholars have argued, the fierce opposition to poem and novel writing by women reversely illustrated its increasing popularity (Chen 2015; Ko 1994; Liu 2009). Despite disapprovals from conservative Confucian scholars, Ko (1992, 14) illuminates that, in Ming and Qing Dynasties, women from elite families were able to give/receive literary education via a 'mother-daughter axis', characterised by 'a complicated process of accommodation, negotiation, subversion and collusion'. This mainly explained the phenomenon of 'talented women' (*cainü*, 才女) in that period. Meanwhile, in contrast to their conservative counterparts, a group of liberal Confucian scholars, such as Feng Menglong (冯梦龙, 1574-1646) and Yuan Mei (袁枚, 1716-1798), strongly criticised the distorted connotation of 'ignorance is women's virtue' and the stigmatisation of talented women (Liu 2009).

Five decades after Western missionaries opened female primary schools in China, formal public education for women was officially sanctioned by the Qing government in the early 1900s. With the increase of educational provision for women, debates shifted from 'whether women should be educated' to 'how women should be properly educated' (Liu and Carpenter 1995). Conservatives and reformists, educators and officials, all committed to re-defining women's roles and corresponding education with the intertwined influence of Western feminist thought and traditional virtues (Bailey 2004). Schooling for girls in this transition period mainly targeted those from middle-class families with the aim of nurturing 'kind and gentle women' (*shunü*, 淑女). Translated into curricula, this meant 'regulating' women to appropriately behave and become better capable of managing the household. As a notable exception, Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培, 1868-1940) opened the door of Peking University to women in 1920 and challenged the sex-stereotypical goals of female education. However, the

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<sup>2</sup> While we translate '*cai*' (才) into 'talent' here and throughout this paper, it is noteworthy that, in Chinese culture, '*cai*' is not something inherited or innated; rather, a person is supposed to devote her/himself into self-cultivation to gain it.

'inappropriate' Western free-style appearance and behaviour of female students stimulated public anxiety. Part of the worry as expressed in the media was that women with free and advanced education may "look down" on their male counterparts and even reject their destiny of becoming mothers' (ibid. 234).

In 1949, the establishment of People's Republic of China and specifically ACWF – the official body representing women's causes – led to a sharp transition in terms of women's rights. Chinese women were given all legislative equal rights, including education, on paper overnight. While retaining their 'noble' roles as wives and mothers, women were expected to 'hold up half the sky' as 'iron women' and contribute to social production as their male counterparts did. The first two decades of the post-Mao period entrenched this instrumentalist emphasis on forming a skilled female workforce and their value to the economic sector. In this round of feminist movement, China became a country with high rate of women's employment; and the percentage of women with no education was significantly reduced in the national illiteracy elimination movement (Attané 2012).

However, this did not extend to expectations that women could undertake crucial roles in the workplace that would require advanced professional knowledge and leadership abilities. Consequently, women were more likely to lose their jobs and be 'pushed back into the kitchen' than male workers during the dismantling of labour units in the 1990s<sup>3</sup> (Leung 2003, 368). Moreover, men had much better chances to obtain family support to move into higher education levels. To promote female education in this scenario, ACWF initiated a range of projects, prominently the Spring Buds Plan launched in 1989. Changes were generally positive: the average length of female education almost doubled from 1990 (4.7 years) to 2010 (8.8 years). However, considerable rural-urban gap and geographical disparities and family expectations for girls remained (Attané 2012). For example, in 2010, the percentage of women with at least a secondary education was 54.2 in urban areas, whereas it was 18.2 in rural areas. As an ACWF's 2000 survey shows, 9.1% parents deemed education to be unnecessary for girls, compared with only 3.5% of parents for boys (ibid.).

The 2000s witnessed a prominent promotion of women's participation at all levels of education. According to Liu (2006), the reasons are three-fold. First, more money from the state and families have been invested into education as the take-off of China's economy. Second, as a side-effect of 'one-child policy', there was no need to decide on who should continue schooling. Last, the expansion of higher education since the late 1990s has resulted

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<sup>3</sup> For example, 76.3% women were in paid work in 1990 compared to 60.8% in 2010 (Attané 2012).

in a general higher enrolment. As mentioned earlier, in 2010, the percentage of women at master's level for the first time surpassed that of men; and a year later, this extended to the undergraduate level. Ma and Yang (2015) even argue that China has entered into a so-called 'feminisation of higher education' era. However, the increase has neither brought about the elimination of hidden inequalities towards women in higher education as Liu and Morgan (2018) observe, nor extended to the doctoral level as is the focus of this paper.

Parallel to the growing number of well-educated women is a backlash returning to the traditional constructs of 'ideal womanhood' with emphasis on their domestic roles, intertwined with higher expectations in women of the new era. As Leung (2003) observes, female sexuality and attractiveness have been re-appraised as the approach to fulfil women's gender roles with China's re-open to the world, particularly to consumerist and neoliberal ideas. This has been in striking contrast to the de-sexualisation and masculinisation of women encapsulated by the 'iron women' images in the Mao era. While maintaining a 'beautiful' and 'young' appearance, being well-educated is also desired for women. Tao (2016) argues that 'super mums' are supposed to self-cultivate with rich childrearing knowledge, be economically independent, and balance work and family. Likewise, as Tu (2016, 103) lists, a 'Hot Mum' should be competent in multiple roles as 'a cook, a baker, a tour guide, a photographer, an event-planner, an English teacher, a Math Olympiad coach, a breadwinner and a knowledgeable consumer'. Meanwhile, some efforts have been made to counter discriminations against women by ACWF and independent feminists, and feminist organisations have managed to mobilise for the first time since the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. While they may mobilise jointly, they have been often in mutual opposition, which has led to the official suppression of civic feminist activities (Angeloff and Lieber 2012). Ironically, ACWF, serving as the Party's mouthpiece and the feminist agency, formally perpetuates the term 'leftover women'.

It is in this context that the old saying – 'ignorance is women's virtue' – has regained its popularity. The question is what level of education for Chinese women in this new era has been perceived to be and constructed as ideal. In the following sections, we aim to address this question by specifically exploring jokes and opinions about highly-educated 'leftover women', highlighting the resurgence of concerns around women's educational attainment.

### ***Materials and methods: discourse analysis of contemporary Chinese media***

This paper has taken as its starting point the understanding that gender is socially constructed, drawing on post-structural theories that highlight how gender is (re)inscribed in discourse, (re)presented in social institutions including the state and the family, and performed within daily (inter)actions (Butler 1990).

To begin examining where and how the construct of 'leftover women' has been framed within Chinese state and popular media, the Chinese search engine *Baidu* (百度) was used to identify the most intensive usages of the phrase, and how it was attached to particular state press, shows and new media. This uncovered three sites of contestation around the notion of being and becoming 'leftover' and highly-educated, with accompanying controversies on the Chinese version of twitter, *Weibo* (微博), and in public threads in WeChat (*weixin*, 微信), a Chinese multi-purpose instant messaging, social media and mobile payment app.

The first, most obvious set of contestations echoes the story of Guo introduced at the start of this paper. The debate centres around negotiations in the dating market, a phenomenon much discussed in the 'leftover women' literature. Of the press papers within this set, our analysis was especially concerned with one entitled 'The price catalogue of Chinese-style blind dates', published in *Phoenix Weekly* in July 2017 and featured subsequently in media coverage 9,750 times according to *Baidu*<sup>4</sup>. Soon, 'what level are you at in this price catalogue?' became a hit topic, with over 487,000 results on *Baidu* associated with the search terms 'price catalogue of blind dates' and 'female PhD'<sup>5</sup>. Our analysis of this price catalogue resonates with other feminist research in China (e.g., Hong Fincher 2014; Yu 2020): resources, including Beijing/Shanghai *hukou* (户口)<sup>6</sup>, location of property, salary, quality of cars and finally educational status, interplay with gendered norms around hypergamy or 'marrying up', which read differently for men and women. Within the catalogue, men are crudely measured by their wealth, whereas what matters for women is their beauty. However, a PhD or 'super woman'<sup>7</sup> status supplants these resources and these two categories of women fall to the lowest levels of marriageability.

Negotiations around the price catalogue and the transmission, resistance and/or internalisation of norms in the associated discussions were also clear in a second set of contestations. This debate centres in comedy shows, including one of the most popular

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<sup>4</sup> Accessed September 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Accessed September 2021.

<sup>6</sup> *Hukou* is a system of household registration in China. The benefits that residents enjoy vary from region to region, but generally relating to the qualification of buying property and the right to public education – two things that are highly concerned in marriage.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'super woman' in this context denotes single women who are economically and intellectually independent and usually enjoy equally high or higher professional status than their male peers.

sitcoms – 'Ipartment' (*aiqing gongyu*, 爱情公寓), in which stereotypical attitudes to gender are exhibited in an exaggerated way. In one episode, the character of Hu Yifei (胡一菲) was reluctant to tell her friends that she was successfully enrolled as a PhD candidate.

Accompanied by a laughter track, the following scene explained the reason – 'a single female PhD' was described as 'the third kind of human beings... the most frightening in the world' (Season 2, Episode 9). The marriageability of female PhDs was also the focus of a much-discussed episode of the Chinese version of the American comedy show 'Saturday Night Live': a spoof drug deal turns out to be a negotiation between a mother and father of unmarried children, in which the punchline voiced by the woman herself ends, 'wait, could it be that female PhDs have to *pay* to get married?' (Season 1, Episode 10, our emphasis). In these constructed spaces, women cast themselves as the butt of jokes, socially (re)enforced by the audience or superimposed laughter tracks, suggesting the ways in which concepts of gender roles have implications both for the women themselves who internalise these misogynies, and for the forms of social scaffolding which support them (Feldshuh 2018).

The final set of contestations which our *Baidu* analysis displayed as the most prevalent brought together this constructed (re)presentation of gender with the realities of negotiations in the marriage market. They were centred in discussions of dating shows, particularly 'If You are the One' (*feichengwura*, 非诚勿扰), the most popular and longest running, yet most controversial dating show in China. The show attracted nationwide audiences since its inception in 2010, and by 2013 was ranked top of the 'The Most Watched 100 Entertainment Shows in China' list released by 'Ze Media', a national media consulting company, triggering a range of transmedia discourses in multiple Chinese media outlets (Li 2015).

We chose to focus on 'If You are the One' not only for this popularity, but also because it has generated a huge base of discussion of the performance of participants, especially female PhD holders/students. Although there have been regular changes in its playing rules, each episode of the show usually has 24 female participants and four male participants. In addition to the main host (male), there are two guest hosts, positioned as psychological (female) and marriage (male) experts who make commentary to the audience and participants as the show evolves. From the 1,080,000 results<sup>8</sup> yielded on *Baidu* that together featured both discussion of 'If You are the One' and 'female PhD', we created a list of episodes that involved female PhDs. These episodes were then transcribed as text, before being analysed using qualitative, thematic methods to explore the ways in which the construct of a female PhD was imbued

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<sup>8</sup> Accessed on 28 September 2021.

with stigma and concerns around being or becoming 'leftover'. The paper thus fills the gap in a growing field of research in China that investigates the gendered implications of state media, but which thus far has tended not to link these discussions with historical framings, nor focused on the potential implications for women's educational aspirations.

### ***'If You Are the One': (re)presentations of the 'ideal' level of female education***

This paper is concerned with the interactions of five women, aged between twenty-two and thirty-three, who participated in 'If You are the One' in episodes during 2012. What these brief interactions between the female PhD holders/students, their potential dates, the guest hosts, and the audiences reveal are the ways in which being/becoming a female PhD in China is a positionality that each woman needed to navigate, and which intersected with other forms of identity and gendered scripts. In these interactions, a PhD identity was considered as both transgressive and judgmental, drawing on a long history of stereotyping that educated women may 'look down' on less well-educated men (Bailey 2004). As the main host highlighted in his introduction of Xu, a 32-year-old woman who lectured at a prestigious Chinese university, 'she is a PhD. So, I would like to remind all male participants to be careful when you talk to her, don't talk nonsense!' (Episode 2010-04-03).

A key feature of 'If You Are the One' in 2012 was an introduction which flashed at the bottom of the television screen, and gave the participant's name, age, career and one-sentence self-introduction every time that they spoke. Our analysis of these self-introductions reflects broader trends of young women's self-presentation in China, such as in social media, in which women navigate discriminatory discourses with agency, but constrained by conservative stereotypes and expectations of beauty (Chang, Ren and Yang 2016). As Liu, aged twenty-six and the first PhD student whose story we would like to explore, emphasised in her own self-introduction, "the problem of life" (a common Chinese euphemism for marriage) continues to need to be balanced with 'studying for a doctor's degree' (Hong Fincher 2014; To 2013). This 'problem' is emphasised not only by women themselves but within families and by authoritative members of society (To 2015; Li 2015), here represented by the host and psychologist of the show. Liu was studying at Peking University, one of the top two universities in China, but this was not regarded as an advantage in the marriage market, as her account of conversations with her mother highlighted:

Liu: With the increase of my educational levels, my mum has decreased her requirements for men. When I was in university, I told her that I wanted a man 1.75 meters tall, my mum said 1.70 meters was good enough for me. Now I am studying for a doctor's degree, my mum said 1.6 meters was enough.

Guest (psychologist): Sounds like this mother-in-law has life wisdom!

Host: I just want to ask you whether you plan to keep studying for a post-doctorate after finishing this PhD?

Liu: no, no, no...

Host: And you will not study for a second doctor's degree?

Liu: No.

Host: This is great! I was afraid that if you were studying for a second doctor's degree, your mum would say, 'as long as you can find a man, this (finding a man to marry her) is good enough!'

(Episode 2012-07-08)

Educational levels are thus measured against other negotiations in the marriage market (Yu 2020): as Liu's educational levels increase, her mother suggests that her expectations of a potential boyfriend's height should correspondingly decrease. By explaining that Liu's mother, a potential mother-in-law, has 'life wisdom', the female guest psychologist validated the view that educational achievements hamper Liu's potential to find a match, making visible the tensions between 'tradition' and 'modernity' that Ji (2015) identifies in the 'leftover women' construct. Equally, the words of the male host that it was 'great' that Liu was not considering further study, because he was 'afraid' that this would lead to even harder work to match her in the marriage market, endorses a limitation and ceiling to Liu's educational aspirations, that she herself in turn was keen to emphasise, repeating 'no' a number of times in response to his probing aged questions about whether she intended to continue studying. What this interchange reveals are the ways in which women themselves can both internalise but also deploy their own agency in negotiating the power of the 'leftover women' discourse and those who perpetuate it (Zhang 2020).

In another episode, Li, a Ukrainian PhD student studying at Wuhan University in China, twenty-eight, provides an additional perspective on the 'leftover women' construct from the perspective of someone 'foreign' to China and learning the language and culture, as she emphasises in her self-introduction: 'I'm very happy to learn Chinese!' For Li, part of this learning about Chinese socio-cultural norms comes from the ways in which her Chinese friends have transmitted discourses to her around becoming educated to the level of PhD:

Li: A Chinese friend once told me that Chinese people divide human beings into three groups: men, women and what else? (Asking audience; audience reply, 'female PhD!'), yes! female PhD! So, it seems that I belong to the fourth group – foreign female PhD. I'm now doing my PhD in Wuhan University.

Host: Welcome!

Li: Thank you! But I hope the male participants will not be afraid when they hear female PhD! We also love life and are very kind...

Host: Very good speech. We can rarely meet such a beautiful female PhD. You just said, 'female PhDs can also be kind', did anyone say that female PhDs are not kind before?

Li: No. Someone said female PhDs only love studying, but do not understand how to cope with romantic relationships.

(Episode 2012-11-03)

The joke that Li repeated – female PhD holders are a kind of 'third gender', neither male nor female – accentuates the ways in which female PhD holders/students are constructed as transgressive, and a status that potential male suitors might be 'afraid' to engage with (a fear echoing the host's choice of words when he said that he was 'afraid' for Liu in the extract above). Li listed a series of stereotypes associated with being a female PhD: that they do not 'love life', that they are 'unkind', that they 'only love studying' and that they do not know 'how to cope' with romantic relationships and social interactions. These were backed by the host in his words 'very good speech', and added to, as the host objectified Li and underscored that we 'rarely meet such a beautiful female PhD', linking to increasingly (re)sexualized discourses of Chinese womanhood (Leung 2003; Tu 2016). The host heightened an old misogynistic stereotype that beauty and brains are rarely combined – Li's beauty is both unexpected, given her educational level and status, but also valued, under new Chinese gendered expectations which demand both sides of the perceived beauty/brain dichotomy under the multiplicity of identities associated with 'Hot Mums' (Tu 2016).

The following extract helps to understand how Chinese women navigate the kinds of stereotypes and external pressures – whether from family or society – that analysis of the episodes with Liu and Li has demonstrated. Zhang, a 30-year-old PhD student studying at London School of Economics, introduced herself with the joke that, 'it's much easier to get an offer from an elite British university than to find a boyfriend!' Zhang appeared in two separate episodes of the show; in both, she was quizzed on her 'choices', and offered binary options between travel and love, or studying for a PhD and love. In response to the first of these 'choices', Zhang downplayed her PhD study as 'so not a big deal', while spotlighting

that love was 'the real happiness'. The difficulty which Zhang faced around finding love was thus situated in her own individual 'choices', rather than the structures of a patriarchal society that requires women's educational and career achievements to be lower than their male counterparts (Hong Fincher 2014; To 2015).

Host: If you have to choose between getting a PhD degree and finding a really good man, what would you do?

Zhang: Of course, the real happiness! PhD is so not a big deal!

(Episode 2012-05-24)

In another episode with a female PhD student studying in Sweden, Yang, aged twenty-seven, makes clear some of the complex negotiations around the PhD identity position. By stressing that she herself had 'no rigid requirement for a boyfriend's education degree', Yang's self-introduction also signaled a stereotype and blame attached with female PhD holders/students in China – they are 'rigid' in their requirements for male partners. Yang both expressed pride and that she was 'happy' with her educational achievements – 'for me, Dr. is the coolest title' – simultaneous with her 'upset' that she was unable to find a boyfriend. For Yang it was a 'strange thing' that many female PhDs were contestants on the dating show.

Yang: I find a strange thing in this programme, that is, many female PhDs have been here, do you know why? ... In China, it's really hard for female PhDs to find their partners. I have tried blind dates several times, we had great chat, but as soon as they knew my education level, they ran away. So I hope that I can find a man with a strong mind and confidence, who can accept that I am a PhD.

Host: We never discriminate against female PhDs. Teacher Huang (guest) is a good representative of female PhDs and many female PhDs have been here.

Guest (psychologist): As a female PhD, I think you need to keep your mind strong first.

Another guest (male): I think for female PhDs, the first thing is forgetting that you are a PhD. You would have no hope if you keep reinforcing that.

Yang: I have already forgotten that, but other people clearly remember this. So, I am quite upset.

Host: So, should I call you Dr. Yang every time when I ask you to speak out?

Yang: I would be happy, because for me Dr. is the coolest title. I don't care that much.

(Episode 2012-08-12)

As in other episodes of the show, the host and guests reached a consensus that being or becoming a female PhD holder was a disadvantage in the marriage market, despite an explicit statement by the male host that 'we never discriminate'. Yang was encouraged to 'forget' and not to 'reinforce' her educational status, if she were to have any 'hope' of finding a match. While being appraised as a good representative of female PhDs by the male host, the guest psychologist herself transmitted a discourse around the blame culture against female PhDs (Li 2015). When Yang suggested that it was for a man to have the confidence to 'accept' her as a female PhD, the guest psychologist countered that the onus was on Yang herself: '*you* need to keep *your* mind strong first' (our emphasis).

In the final episode of 'If You are the One' that we examined, a female master's student, Duo, aged twenty-two, also discussed the pressure placed upon female students with the 'life dream' to reach a PhD: to 'hurry to find a husband' *before* studying further. For Peng, a male postdoctoral fellow in a prestigious British university and potential match for Duo, aged thirty-five, there was 'no chance' for female PhDs and entrepreneurs – the 'super women' of the Chinese marriage market. Peng deployed an old Chinese proverb to argue that highly educated women's depths are 'too deep', with hearts impossible to capture, 'like needles in the sea':

Duo: My life dream is becoming a female PhD, but before that, I am now a master student, I need to hurry to find a husband. With him at home, then I can focus on my study.

Host: This is a good idea.

Duo, speaking to Peng: So, I want to know, what kind of girls do scientists like you like?

Host: His next video will specifically explain this.

Peng (talking about his ideal girlfriend): Fashionable in appearance, but conservative inside... There is an old saying that 'women's hearts are like needles in the sea', if a girl has high levels of education, she must 'have a limitless depth'. So, there is no chance for female PhDs and entrepreneurs.

(Episode 2012-09-09)

Looking across varied episodes of 'If You are the One' thus demonstrates the ways in which discourses around what it means to be and become a PhD holder for young Chinese women are transmitted and perpetuated by those within authority, such as the

show's experts, and proximal relationships, such as women's families or in the male gaze of potential romantic matches (Li 2015). As others have argued (Hong Fincher 2014; Feldshuh 2018), a related dimension of the construction of 'leftover women' is through the power of jokes in reinforcing the discourse that female PhDs are a 'third' gender, simultaneous with common assertions that this is 'nothing to do with discrimination', as the male host expressed. To these discursive tropes, we add the resurgence of old sayings and proverbs to buttress contemporary misogynies. Our analysis simultaneously highlights, however, individual women's agency in negotiating these discourses, echoing other feminist work that considers resistances to the construct (Zhang 2020).

The focus of our analysis, however, in addition to drawing out these nuances, is the ways in which young women on 'If You are the One' are encouraged to 'forget' their educational status or to 'choose otherwise'. It is the potential consequences of these exhortations for young women's educational aspirations that we will turn to in our conclusion, to tease out their implications in a social context in which women's participation at master's level has been now equal to their Chinese male counterparts, but in which gender parity has tailed off at the doctoral level.

### **Conclusion: is 'Ignorance Women's Virtue' in modern China?**

The analysis which we have presented in this paper provides two original contributions to the burgeoning literature discussing the phenomenon of 'leftover women'. First, through the comparison of historical discourses around women's 'ideal' educational levels, we illuminate the ways in which the phenomenon has evolved from a complex history of limits placed upon women's aspirations, rising to popularity in state and popular media over the last fifteen years or so, but drawing on socio-cultural concepts that long pre-date it. The second is to focus specifically on the educational dimensions of the 'leftover women' phenomenon in China, deepening the specificity of the 'third high' identified by other scholars, and building on the work of those who focus on the first two highs of age and salary (Hong Fincher 2014; Ji and Yeung 2014). Our qualitative analysis maps out the discursive framings of the delay to marriage associated with doctoral studies, complementing the statistics which quantitative studies have identified (Qian and Qian 2014).

In choosing to concentrate on the women in Chinese dating shows, we have to an extent highlighted a self-selecting sample of women who may themselves express a high level of anxiety about their own 'leftover' identity, contrasting with other studies (e.g., Zhang 2020), who have delved into the salience of 'leftover women' with those seeking new forms of social connection and relational autonomy outside the traditional structures of heterosexual marriage. By exploring these anxieties in the context of a state-sponsored television show, we show how women's 'choices' are shaped not only by patriarchal structures and norms but relatedly by state-sanctioned discrimination that scaffolds their 'ideal' roles and place within society, under the guise of entertainment, perpetuating the status quo and shoring up privilege (Li 2015; Luo and Sun 2015).

From the data in which state and popular discourses align, we thus argue that the old saying of 'ignorance is women's virtue', once shifted from the reinforcement of virtue to the disapproval of literary and artistic education, and further to the general caution towards female education, has regained its former legitimacy and popularity, but in re-purposed ways for the modern, post-socialist era. Our analysis has shown that not being 'over' educated parallels not becoming 'leftover' as a source of *virtue* for women, imbuing the conservative, traditional maxim with new nuance. Within these gendered norms and expectations, close analysis of these modern media unveils that undergraduate and, to a lesser extent, master's degrees are thought as an 'ideal' threshold for women, enabling them by their early and mid 20s to become 'model' wives and mothers, with decent jobs and raising highly educated children (To 2013; Tu 2016). By the level of PhDs, however, both state discourse and women's own narratives allude to the perceived risk of becoming 'leftover', via the combination of ageism discourses through increasing age through years of study (Qian and Qian 2014) and patriarchal norms constructing 'marrying up' (hypergamy) as 'ideal' (Ji 2015; Yu 2020). We suggest that these parallels pose a risk not only to broad forms of gender equality, but to women's educational aspirations and participation at the top levels of higher education and academia, presenting a challenge to the progression of social justice in China. They suggest a backlash to female education that may result in the same outcomes as earlier backlashes to female labour participation – women being 'pushed back into the kitchen' (Leung 2003), and participation in higher education falling in the same way.

A final note: since we began this paper, two relevant policies have come into force in China. First, the 'three-children' policy was formally put into practice in September 2021, allowing all couples to have up to three children, to boost the steadily declining birth-rate in China. It immediately became the top-trending search on social media. In contrast, however, significantly less public attention has been paid to the policy document *The Outline of Women Development (2021-2030)*, issued by the State Council in the same month, aiming to achieve the balance of gender ratio at all levels of higher education. To that, efforts are only needed at the doctoral level. These two policies together, we suggest, may intensify the pressure on women in terms of expectations to study, marry and have children. The equilibrium between these two potentially contradictory aims of the state remains to be seen, and its impact on Chinese women's educational aspirations an important site of continued research.

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