The shengnü phenomenon: Tradition and modernity in Chinese television series

Karlijn Velthuis
s1134825
MA East Asian Studies
Prof.dr. S.R. Landsberger
2015-2016
Submission date: 08-01-2017
Word amount: 13014

Karlijn Velthuis
Klikspaanweg 18, Leiden
+31 622495948
k.e.velthuis@umail.leidenuniv.nl

Table of Contents

Introduction

Shengnü (or □□, meaning "leftover women", as the word shèng □ means "leftover, residue, remains" and the word nü □ women) have been a hot topic in China. Ever since a film with the title "Marriage Market Takeover" was uploaded early 2016, shengnü have received close attention worldwide as well. The film is part of a global campaign by the luxury Japanese cosmetics company called SK-II. The Swedish agency Forsman & Bodenfors created the film, in which Chinese women, who have received the label of "leftover women" or shengnü, share their personal stories and describe the clash between their single status and the societal expectations that nowadays surround many young Chinese women such as themselves. The film was first launched on the Chinese video hosting site Youku, and later uploaded on the company's YouTube account and Facebook page.[1] It went viral: it gained "25 millions views and 6.5 million social interactions, and led to 1,600 editorial articles in 54 countries."[2] The film was also the first of its kind to make it to the top 10 trending list on Weibo.[3] Soon after its release, Western news outlets such as the online edition of The Telegraph, UK;[4] and the Huffington Post[5] began reporting on the video as well.

As a high-earning group of women, shengnü are an obvious target group for the luxury cosmetics brand. However, notwithstanding its commercial nature, the film carries an empowering message. In the film, the shengnü attend a Shanghai marriage market where photographic portraits of themselves have been displayed in view of their parents and many others who have come to the market hoping to find suitable partners for their children. The portraits are captioned with texts that declare a message of independence and happiness from the shengnü, simultaneously opposing their imposed label and the implied

1 Contagious I/O
2 Harrington 2016
3 Harrington 2016
4 The Telegraph 2016
5 Ma 2016

negative connotations that have impacted the lives of the pictured women. A "marriage market takeover" indeed.[6]

This commercial might bode the beginning of a countermovement from the shengnü themselves against the pressures they face in a society where the term of shengnü is still used as an insult. On May 24, 2016, a lengthy op-ed article published by Chinese state media outlet Xinhua that analysed Taiwan's first female president Cai Yingwen. The author, General Wang Weixing of the Academy of Military Sciences in Beijing, announced Cai to be unfit to rule, using her status of shengnü as the main reason. "As a single female politician, she has no emotional encumbrances of love, no family restraint, no children to worry about. Her political style and tactics are often emotional, personalized, and extreme".[7] After its publication, the article produced a firestorm of online discussion on social media, both in China and worldwide, with the result of the article being taken down from the news site. The removal was actually issued by the government, as the government directive with the order "to remove the article from all media" was leaked.[8]

These two quite recent examples illustrate that shengnü are part of an on-going, dynamic, societal discussion developing in China today; a discussion that illuminates the conflicts between the country's traditional views on marriage and gender roles and China's modernizing society alongside with its shifting values and norms.

In this thesis, I want to research how the Chinese women that match the description of shengnü are portrayed and constructed in Chinese mass media. Since the concept of shengnü began circulating in the Chinese media around 2007, the term has started appearing in online blogs, articles and has also found its way into television. Women that are described as shengnü appear in talk shows and in popular dating shows such as *Let's Date* and *Go for Love*.[9] The producer of the wildly popular dating game show *If You Are The One;* the highest rated dating show in China that attracts millions of viewers, has said in an

6 SK-II 2016
7 Lu & Jiang 2016
8 Total Taipei 2016
9 Li 2015: 519

interview that the show was directly inspired by the shengnü phenomenon.[10] Shengnü have also begun to appear in movies and television series, sometimes even starring as the main characters.

For this thesis, I have chosen in particular the medium of Chinese television series that feature, as their main character, a shengnü. There has been little to no research yet done on this particular topic of shengnü in television series. How is the phenomenon of shengnü translated from the factual text of a newspaper/magazine to the fictional text of a television series? Do their perspectives on shengnü correspond or differ, and do they confirm the existing stereotypes or present a more complicated picture? I hope my research will result in a broader understanding of the discussion and portrayal of shengnü in Chinese mass media.

Theoretical Framework & Methodology

This thesis uses Florian Schneider's study of Chinese television. Schneider regards "media content as an essential part of politics"[11], but emphasizes that to view Chinese TV dramas solely as a central mouthpiece of the Party is "misleading". Even though the Party indeed plays "an important role in regulating TV entertainment content in China, just as they continue to exert substantial influence over media content in general"[12], other influences are at play concerning the control of the industry. The market and its commercial incentives certainly also shape much of the content seen in mass media today.[13]

This thesis draws on French philosopher and sociologist Michael Foucault's concepts of discourse and power in order to view the role of the media in the dissemination of the popular discourse concerning shengnü in Chinese society. Foucault does not frequently directly mention the media in his work, but his idea that "power is everywhere",[14] and is based in discourse, can be used in the discussion how the leftover women discourse is used in and through the

10 Li 2015: 525
11 Schneider 2012: 6
12 Schneider 2012: 4
13 Schneider 2012: 3-4
14 Foucault 1978: 93

media. To quote Foucault: “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart”.[15] Foucault gives an example of the two sides of discourse; of how a ‘dominant discourse’ also gives rise to a ‘reverse discourse’[16], using the discourse on homosexuality: ”There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion pederasty, and ‘psychic hermaphroditism’ made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of ‘perversity’; but it also made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturality’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified”.[17] As such, the two sides to a discourse can exist simultaneously in society.

Discourses found in the media shape how we “relate to objects around us”, and how we define issues that play a role in society.[18] To further quote Schneider, the “messages that reach us though the media are part of broader social discourses”.[19]

Mass media play an important role in forming public opinion, as it helps to construct the perceived reality of single women.[20] Television series in particular enjoy immense popularity. China is the biggest consumer of television dramas in the world: the average Chinese person watches one or two episodes per day. The influence of the discourse found in the content of television series must thus certainly not be underestimated.[21]

In order to attract a mass audience, television series mostly aim to be as unambiguous as possible. As in most cases of mass communication, television series use their visual tools in order to clearly convey their plots and messages to the viewer, which limit the possibility of multiple interpretations of its content. It

15 Foucault 1978: 101
16 Ledgers 1997: 9-10
17 Foucault 1978: 101
18 Schneider 2012: 7
19 Schneider 2012: 6
20 Gong, Tu & Jiang 2015: 2
21 Schneider 2012: 9-10

is still problematic to distinguish a single reading of a television series. However, because of its nature, the analysis of a television series can be said to be more straightforward than, say, the analysis of art pieces, which tend to be more ambiguous and even encourages multiple interpretations.[22]

I explore the discourse surrounding shengnü in two Chinese television series; both produced and broadcasted in the year 2011. Regarding these two Chinese television series I have watched and analysed, it is my particular interest how the representation of shengnü in popular media compares to the official view found in the previously mentioned publications by the ACFW and the state media of the Xinhua News Agency.

22 Schneider 2012: 10-14

Chapter One: The origin, portrayal and reality of "shengnü"

1.1 The origin of shengnü and the All-China Women's Federation

The term shengnü finds it origin in Japan, where the word "3S woman" was used to describe a comparable category of women: the "3S" stand for "Single, Seventies (meaning the 1970s) and Stuck".[23] In China, the slang term 'shengnü' is used to describe a similar category of women: single, urban and professional women from the middle-class, with an age starting as early as 25. As such, these women are in possession of the so-called "three-highs": they are highly educated, highly paid and highly independent.[24]

In other words, these women have fully enjoyed the benefits of China's economic rise and increasing modernity: they have received an education that has made them successful in a booming job market, which has further enabled their current independent lifestyles. However, the word "leftover" does suggest some negative connotations.

It is not clear when exactly the term shengnü began being used in the Chinese mass media, though it is clear its Japanese counterpart first inspired the term to increasingly start circulating since the mid-2000s in Chinese media.[25] As a result of this increasing circulation, the term was mentioned in 2007 in a report by the state-sponsored All-China Women's Federation (henceforth ACWF), that defined shengnü as single, highly educated women older than 27. In the same year, China's Ministry of Education also added the term shengnü as an official word in its dictionary, alongside other popular "new expressions" that had arisen in China in the year 2006.[26] Since 2007, the state media has started to circulate the term shengnü in its publications suiting its own agenda- something I will further elaborate on later in this chapter.

---

23 Wang 2012: 2
24 Wang 2012: 3
25 Wang 2012: 11
26 Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China

The Chinese Communist Party (henceforth CCP) founded the ACWF in 1949 with the mission to "protect women's rights and interests" and promote gender equality. The ACWF has its own magazine (Women of China Magazine), newspaper (China Women's Daily) and publishing house (China Women's Publishing House). Besides Chinese, they also produce English-language publications.

Women's interests are key to the organization, and since Deng Xiaoping's extensive reforms in the 80s, it has been able to actively engage in national policy making. [27] Since then, the organization has also established research centres on woman's affairs, promoted fieldwork investigations and developed international contacts with other international feminist organizations, as well as establishing (international) conferences such as the Beijing United Nations conference on women in 1995.[28] However, a contradiction remains to exist between the initiatives and goals within the organization and the top-down policies of the Party. Within the authoritarian context, and because of the ACWF's financial and ideological dependency on the Party, the CCP's priorities "ultimately determine the actual extent of policy change", which has been the case since the very founding of the ACWF in 1949.[29]

The contradiction between priorities can result in "the ACWF's inconsistent and even conflicting attitude towards women".[30] An example of this has been ACWF's promotion of policies that might even "directly imperil the female body" such as the One-child policy and other policies regarding family planning.[31] On the other hand it has been successful in lobbying for legislation that seeks to strengthen the rights of women, such as the Law of Protection of Rights and interests of Women, 1992 and the 2014 drafting of the National Law Against Domestic Violence. [32] This inconsistency is likewise reflected in the organisation's promotion of the leftover women discourse, which I will now discuss further.

---

27 Tsimonis 2015: 58
28 Tsimonis 2015: 66
29 Tsimonis 2015: 71
30 Tsimonis 2015: 60
31 Tsimonis 2015: 64
32 Tsimonis 2015: 63

Since the introduction of the shengnü term, the women's federation has published many articles (mostly in Chinese) concerning shengnü on its official website and in its other publications. On its news website alone, some 200 editorials have been published between the years 2007 and 2012 that include the term shengnü, with headlines such as: "Why are professional women left over?" and "Let experts tell you how to get out of the 'leftover women' dilemma".[33]

Leta Hong Fincher, the author of the book *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* has quoted articles (re)posted on the ACWF website. These articles provide shengnü with solutions as to shed their "leftover" status, but also offer some critique and caution regarding career-oriented women:

Pretty girls don't need a lot of education to marry into a rich and powerful family, but girls with an average or ugly appearance will find it difficult. These kinds of girls hope to further their education in order to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is, they don't realize that as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their M.A. or Ph.D., they are already old, like yellowed pearls.[34]

Many highly educated "leftover women" are very progressive in their thinking and enjoy going to nightclubs to search for a one-night stand, or they become the mistress of a high official or rich man. It is only when they have lost their youth and are kicked out by the man that they decide to look for a life partner. Therefore, most "leftover women" do not deserve our sympathy.[35]

Since Fincher's publication on ACFW's coverage on shengnü, the number of pages covering shengnü on both the organisation's English and Chinese website has dropped. Currently, the English and Chinese versions of the ACWF do no longer feature the articles from which Fincher has quoted. I was not able to

33 Li 2015: 525
34 Fincher 2012
35 Liu 2011

recover the original Chinese source for the first quote offered by Fincher. The quote does still appear in a handful of Chinese blogs, such as the *ChinaDaily Forum* and *Dooland.com*.[36] The second article that Fincher quotes from has likewise disappeared from the website of the ACWF, but the original Chinese source remains on the Xinhua website, with the title "Do leftover women deserve our sympathy?". Indeed, many of the ACWF articles were originally published by the Xinhua News Agency, after which they were reposted by many major portals, search engines and websites- including publications by the ACWF.[37]

Currently, the English website of the ACWF features around 100 articles relating to "leftover" woman with the first article published on 2007-04-27 and the most recent article published on 2016-08-24.[38] In contrast, the Chinese website yields fewer results: 58 articles that mention shengnü. This is quite a drop from the original 200 editorials. The reason for the deletion of the articles on the ACWF website cannot be determined. However, it is reasonable to assume a hypothetical correlation between the disappearance of the articles on the website following the publication of Fincher's work and its wide circulation in the Western media.[39]

Hence, the publications by ACWF and by the state media focus mostly on single women and the attributes that make them leftover: they are either too picky, ambitious or too wilful and it is up to them to discard their problematic label. The men's role and what their contribution to the shengnü phenomenon might entail are largely left out of the discourse found in the state media and the ACWF articles.[40]

As mentioned earlier, the ACWF cannot be seen as a fully independent women's organization. Instead, it supports the CCP in managing women's affairs in accordance with the government's interests and ideologies.[41] Furthermore, the original source for many of the ACWF articles is the Xinhua News agency, known as the largest Party media organization. The organization experienced

36 See links in the bibliography
37 Fincher 2014: 19
38 All-China Women's Federation
39 Magistad 2013
40 Fincher 2014: 17-20
41 Zhang 2003: 185-186

commercialization starting in the 90s, and had it to adapt to intense competition in the market. It did this by producing attractive and commercially interesting content, which brought about the emergence of more diverse media. Throughout its commercialization, the organization has continued to be an agency of the Party and largely sticks to the Party line.[42]

For the Xinhua News Agency and the ACWF to introduce and propagate the concept of shengnü is therefore significant according to Fincher. In her book, the role of the Chinese government in creating and propagating the category of shengnü is heavily emphasized. Fincher cites two important motives behind the government's dissemination of the shengnü label. Firstly, the government promotes marriage in order to sustain social stability. Under President Hu Jintao (who was the president of China from 2003 to 2013), a "harmonious society" became an important goal for the government, one that could be gained by maintaining social stability. Marriage and family life were important components of this stability, as President Hu Jintao declared: "a harmonious family is the foundation of a harmonious society".[43] Urging shengnü to marry, and marry early, can be seen as one of the tools to achieve social stability.

Secondly, as Fincher argues, shengnü are part of the government's population planning goals, hoping to improve both the quality and quantity of the population by having this category of educated, middle class, "high-quality" women "marry and have a child for the good of the nation".[44] This includes the government's efforts to restore the unbalanced sex ratio: a direct consequence of the One-child policy, implemented during the late 70s. Under the influence of China's traditional family values and the One-child policy, parents strongly favoured boys instead of girls. This resulted in China's population being one of the few countries in the world that have a higher proportion of men than women. It is only second to India, which currently has the world's highest sex ratio with 107.6 men for 100 women in 2015, while China is at 106.3 men.[45] The sex imbalance peaked in 2008 at 120 boys for 100 girls, after which it has begun to decrease very gradually. The irony is that China actually is forced to deal with

42 Xing 2005: 73-77
43 Fincher 2014: 23
44 Fincher 2014: 30
45 Attané 2015

leftover *men.*[46] Nevertheless, women remain the actual spearhead of the "leftover" movement that has made them such a sensational topic in the media. If you type in "shengnü" on China's most popular search engine Baidu, it gives you 31.300.000 million results, whereas the search of leftover men, or shengnan (□□), only yields 11.100.000 results.[47] The term shengnan is not only used less, in the marriage market urban bachelors are even described as "golden bachelors" or "diamond single men": all quite positive terms. The more disparaging terms are reserved for single men of "lower socioeconomic status".[48]

With these two motives in mind, Fincher argues that the propagation of shengnü by the ACWF is part of a state media campaign, where the ACWF takes "a key role in the campaign to compel urban educated women to stop focusing on their careers and get married".[49]

Building on Fincher's work but offering her own conclusions, Sandy To further argues that the patriarchal constraints women face in China are at the root of the shengnü phenomenon. Through interviews with 50 shengnü over the course of three years, To focuses on women's agency dealing with the discrimination and pressure that comes out of the patriarchal views of the "state, society and their families".[50] To emphasizes that she has found that many shengnü still hold traditional views concerning marriage and view it as a necessary part of life, and she thus dismisses the persistent stereotype in the Chinese media of shengnü choosing career over marriage. It is rather the discrimination that shengnü face in the marriage market that causes difficulties in finding partners, such as the patriarchal stigma attached to Chinese men marrying women with higher accomplishments (a point I will discuss further in this chapter).[51]

1.2 Shengnü in the Chinese media

46 Attané 2015
47 This search was last done on 07-10-16
48 Zhang & Sun 2014: 125
49 Fincher 2014: 18
50 Liu 2015: 471
51 Liu 2015: 472-473

What arguably started as a state media campaign has now turned into a full-out media circus. Since 2007, the concept of shengnü has found its way into the mainstream Chinese media. The discourse on shengnü in the mass media reflects the representation of shengnü in the articles by the Xinhua News Agency and the ACWF. Printed media such as newspapers and magazines firstly problematized shengnü, where being a single woman in her late twenties is presented as a distinct social problem. For instance, they are presented as a burden to their families. The shengnü in question also possess some problematic qualities that have produced their single status. The articles provide the readers with numerous reasons why shengnü are still single and "unwanted on the marriage market".[52] For example, many shengnü, as products of the One-child policy, are seen as having been spoiled by their over-protective parents. They are also projected as too materialistic, self-interested and picky, and too demanding towards their prospective husbands. Other articles state that they are too passive when it comes to dating, lack a rich social life or are simply too career-oriented.[53] Newspapers and other media have displayed shengnü in cartoons, depicting them as "too smart and intimidating to attract a husband".[54] Other popular cartoons show shengnü once again as too picky; indefinitely waiting for the perfect man that actually does not exist, while simultaneously ignoring 'normal' men that they deem to be beneath them.[55] In summary, shengnü have the "wrong attitude and lifestyle".[56]

In Chinese television, shengnü have also become popular subjects. An example of their popularity is their appearance in one of the most popular (dating) shows in China: *If You Are The One* (henceforth IYATO), which was directly inspired by the leftover-women phenomenon. In the show, 24 women, mostly urban and professional, scrutinize and judge a bachelor based on a range of factors, such as his looks, work, background, his view on marriage and children, and his hobbies.[57] In the show, these women are often painted as

52 Chen 2011: 11
53 Chen 2011: 17-19
54 Fincher 2014: 25
55 Fincher 2014: 26-28
56 Chen 2011: 3
57 Luo & Sun 2015: 240

materialistic. One of the show's most (in)famous quotes occurred when a bachelor asked a woman if she wanted to go on a bike ride with him. She answered that she would "rather cry in a BMW car than laugh on the backseat of a bicycle".[58]

Alongside the stigmatization of shengnü by the Party and the mass media, some counter-messages have also arisen that offer a defence of shengnü (the SK-II commercial being one recent example).[59] However, shengnü generally are held accountable for their own single status. They are "not popular in the marriage market because they lack qualities or techniques to initiate and manage a relationship. Countless articles in popular newspapers and magazines analyse shengnü in detail, reaching similar conclusions to reveal their flaws".[60] A study that undertook a content-analysis of news coverage of female singles in Mainland China from 2008 to 2013 found that the Chinese news media indeed suggest that single women "should take more personal responsibility for their single status", and that "single women themselves, not other societal factors, are responsible for their single status".[61] This same study did not find similar patterns in news coverage for single men.

The Chinese mass media can therefore be seen as an important tool for stigmatizing shengnü and spreading their flawed attributes throughout Chinese society.

1.3 The reality that shengnü face

The percentage of single Chinese women, for the ages of 25-29, has risen significantly in a short period of time: from 8.7% in 2000 to 21.6% in 2010.[62] This rapid growth in number counts for many as another reason to view shengnü as a concern and as a distinct social problem.[63]

---

58 Luo & Sun 2015: 251
59 Chen 2011: 17
60 Chen 2011: 18
61 Gong, Tu & Jiang 2015: 10
62 Gong, Tu & Jiang 2015: 2
63 Zhang & Sun 2014: 125

One of the reasons shengnü might have difficulties in finding a partner is the cultural practice of hypergamy: the phenomenon of women "marrying up" and men "marrying down" that was mentioned earlier.[64] This phenomenon causes a shortage of both men and women on different ends of the social ladder. Huang Yuanyuan, a 29-year-old single woman, commented on this phenomenon in an interview with the BBC:

> *"...A-quality guys will find B-quality women, B-quality guys will find C-quality women, and C-quality men will find D-quality women. The people left are A-quality women and D-quality men. So if you are a leftover woman, you are A-quality."*[65]

The likelihood of marriage for women in urban areas actually "decreases significantly with increased education levels".[66] A reason behind this could be that women have a so-called "shorter window of time", meaning the ideal age for women to marry is shorter than for men. The ideal age for women ranges from 25 to 28 years old and declines after the age of 30, whereas men have until they are 40 to really start worrying about finding a spouse and to receive social scrutiny.[67] Women who choose to delay marriage in order to enhance their education and careers will feel the full brunt of this double standard: not only are they less marriageable because they missed their ideal "window of time", they also appeal to less men because of their higher education and high economic status. A misogynistic joke that has been circulated in the media since 2012 that touches on this topic, goes as follows: "The world has three types of humans: Men, Women and Female PhDs".[68] It seems that some indeed question the marriageability of this 'third type of human', as when you type in "Female PhD" (or □□□ nü boshi) into search engine Baidu, the very first result it yields is: "Are female PhDs really no good when it comes to marriage?" (□□□□□□□□□□).[69]

64 Luo & Sun 2015: 243
65 Magistad 2013
66 Gaetano 2014: 125
67 Luo & Sun 2015: 243
68 Gaetano 2014: 126
69 Baidu, search was last done on 06-01-2017

Singles, in particular single women, still face stereotyping and discrimination in many societies. This is certainly not only limited to China, although family values are held in higher esteem in Asian countries than for example in a more individualised society such as the United States. When marriage and family are highly valued, singlehood is often regarded as non-traditional and in conflict with these values.[70]

Shengnü are ostracized as such in Chinese society and media partly because they do not comply with the traditional view of an ideal woman; an ideal that can be effectively summarized through the myth of "good wife, wise mother" (□□□□). This ideal woman abided by the traditional "three obediences" and "four virtues".[71] As Yuan Zhang Dickerson has summarized: "Simply put, Chinese society has defined a desirable woman as a good daughter, obedient and virtuous wife, selfless and hardworking mother."[72] This myth of the ideal women was rejected during the Mao era, during which women were encouraged to work outside their home and join the labour force[73], and which was when Chairman Mao made the famous quote that "women hold up half the sky" that cemented his approach to male-female equality.[74]

However, by rejecting its socialist past, the post-Mao era knew a resurgence of the term, which carried the implication that the duties of the ideal woman were to stay at home to "take care of the husband and teach the children".[75] However, the ideal of such a woman that is essentially a housewife, is not an affordable reality in China (and in many other countries for that matter). Thus, women remain having to successfully juggle their family life together with a job.[76] These jobs should preferably not greatly interfere with family life. According to a survey by the Chinese Association of Studies of Marriages and Relationships carried out in 2010[77], men prefer women with easy, less demanding, more flexible jobs such as "school teachers or secretaries".[78] In the

70 Gong, Tu & Jiang 2015: 2-3
71 Dickerson 2016: 24
72 Dickerson 2016: 24-25
73 Zhang & Sun 2014: 126
74 Dickerson 2016: 7
75 Zhang & Sun 2014: 126-127
76 Chen 2011: 27
77 Chinese Association of Studies of Marriages and Relationships
78 Chen 2011: 27

marriage market, more demanding and weighty jobs such as lawyers and doctors are less popular.[79]

These specific requirements for an ideal woman do not fit the characteristics of a typical shengnü, who is independent and ambitious. After all, as Zhou Chen puts it, "shengnü desire a career rather than a job".[80]

The socio-economic changes that started in China in the 80s and that have produced this highly educated, modernised group of women do not align with the gender dynamics that predominantly remain rigid and traditional in China's current society. Presently, China's "patriarchal culture lacks any positive concepts for describing independent career women who do not fit into traditional domestic roles".[81]

Another issue that greatly impacts the life and reality of shengnü is their family. Parents have been found to be of considerable influence not only regarding their child's "educational and occupational achievements",[82] but also their love life and marital choice. This is in particular the case in China, where the One-child policy focuses the parent's attention and hopes for their future solely on their one child.[83] Furthermore, as the only child, the pressure is high to produce the family's next descendants. If a child fails to meet this responsibility, this will be seen as an offence against their parents and the failure to uphold the important notion of filial piety.[84] Besides the notion of filial piety though, parents are also highly motivated to insure that their children find a partner because of the "economic insecurities of the reform era", as the parent's "own support in old age is tied to their single child's success and happiness".[85] The parent's concern for their child's future (and their own) is reflected in the existence of parental matchmaking corners, often taking place in public parks in urban cities all across China.[86]

---

79 Chen 2011: 26-27
80 Chen 2011: 32
81 To 2013: 2
82 To 2015: 14
83 Gong, Tu & Jiang 2015: 3
84 Gong, Tu & Jiang 2015: 4
85 Zhang & Sun 2014: 139
86 Zhang & Sun 2014: 120

Young, educated and single women in China face a far more nuanced and complex reality, one that combines many facets of the Chinese society. It is a reality that goes beyond the one-sided and stereotypical image of a materialistic, picky and overall flawed persons that the Chinese media has painted of them.

Chapter Two: Shengnü in Chinese television series

2.1 Shengnü in television series: the first series

Shengnü have appeared in so many television series that they have now received their own category: □□□ shengnü ju, or “leftover-women series”. Baidu yields 31 results, ranging from the years 2005 until 2015, for television series

that directly deal with shengnü in their content and carry the label of □□ or shengnü.[87]

The following two series, produced in 2011, have a woman in her thirties with a successful career and a struggling love life as their main character. Both series have as genre "romance", with around 25 episodes, each of a 45-minute length.

Series 1: Li Chuntian's Spring □□□□□□(Li Chuntian de chuntian)

Production company: Beijing Forbidden City Film Co. Ltd.
First airing: 07-20-2011
Number of episodes: 24
Director: Yu Chun □□

Plot

Li Chuntian is a newspaper editor living in Beijing. She is quite outspoken and frank, and lives her life in a happy-go-lucky sort of way. The series starts off with Chuntian celebrating her 38th birthday together with friends. Bent over her birthday cake, she urgently prays that she might get married in the coming year. Her requirements for a partner are as follows: he must be handsome, over 40 years old and unmarried without children.

The following day, she meets someone who meets all the criteria: Liang Bing, a successful businessman. However, the two get off to a bad start. Chuntian accidently rams into his expensive Bentley with her car. The two bicker over the car insurance payments. Liang Bing coincidentally also becomes the vice-chairman of the newspaper Chuntian works for. After being forced to work together, they finally reach an agreement about the car insurance and become good friends. As the series progresses, things about Liang Bing's dark past are revealed, such as the betrayal of his ex-wife and the estrangement of his father. As he and Chuntian cope with these issues, the two of them grow ever closer.

Liang Bing plans to permanently move to the United States for his business. Before leaving, he visits Chuntian in order to confess his love for her. At

87 Baidu, search was last done on 07-10-2016

that moment however, Chuntian receives a phone call informing her that her father was involved in a car accident. She immediately rushes to the hospital. Unable to have conveyed his feelings for Chuntian, Liang Bing leaves for America.

A year passes, and quite some things have changed. Chuntian is now 39, still single, and has been promoted. Liang Bing is in a relationship with his secretary. At work, Chuntian checks the account of an e-mail address she used before she was promoted, and suddenly discovers an old e-mail sent by Liang Bing exactly a year ago. In the e-mail Liang Bing makes his feelings towards her quite clear. She responds to his love letter in a similar fashion, but then finds out about Liang Bing's relationship with his secretary, when she receives their wedding invitation.

As fate would have it, Liang Bing and Chuntian happen to stay in the same hotel while on their business trips. Liang Bing asks her why she never responded to his e-mail, and she explains that she has, but one year late due to the un-used e-mail account. Liang Bing counters he has never received her reply, and the two part ways in confusion.

One night before the wedding, Liang Bing's fiancée confronts him about his lack of interest in their impending wedding. She then reveals that she was the one that deleted Chuntian's reply to Liang Bing. The pair cancels the wedding and break off their engagement. Liang Bing then sets off to find Chuntian, who has gone out drinking in order to drown her sorrows regarding Liang Bing's wedding. She then sees Liang Bing walking towards her. Breaking into a teary-eyed smile, she runs to him and they have a big embrace. This romantic scene marks the end of the series.

In the analysis of the two television series, I focus on one subject: shengnü. First, I outline the plot of the series, as the development of the storyline is important for context and the character development of the shengnü. Then, I focus on the representation of the shengnü. How does the environment (such as work, family and friends) of the shengnü deal with the single status of the shengnü, and lastly, how does the shengnü herself deal with her own status?

Character development and the shengnü's environment

In 2010, the Marriage and Family Association (a group affiliated to the ACWF) carried out a nation-wide survey regarding Chinese citizens' attitude towards love and marriage under more than 30.000 people. In the findings of the survey, the subheading "See What Category of 'Leftover' You Belong To" was used, which reflected how the participants of the survey regarded the chances of marriage women of different ages had.[88] Starting from the age of 25, single women were listed into different categories depending on their age. Women aged 25 to 27, were called "struggling leftover fighters", as they still have some fight left in them in order to find a husband. Women aged 28 to 31 belong to the "doomed leftovers", as their chances of marriage are increasingly slim. From age 32 to 36, women are called "failed leftovers" while women who over 36 are considered to be "forever leftovers" as they will never be able to get married.[89] I have encountered this hierarchal categorization of single women at other times during my research. For example, this categorization was mentioned by one of the shengnü interviewed by Dickerson in her dissertation, and in the 11th episode of this series, Liang Bing actually tells Chuntian and her colleagues of the different categorizations. This happens during a work meeting where they are discussing topics for the newspaper's new publication, and Liang Bing comes up with the topic of shengnü. Chuntian listens to Liang Bing's summarizations with a carefully blank face while her colleagues hastily retreat to escape from the uncomfortable situation. Meanwhile, Liang Bing is completely ignorant to the fact he has brought up a rather sensitive topic.[90]

At 38, Chuntian falls into this fourth and last category: the 'ultimately doomed' leftover woman. As one of her friends tells her: "If you don't get married this year, you'll have lost your last chance forever."[91] Aware of the ever-growing doom and pressure surrounding her age, Chuntian starts the series with a scene in which she is urgently praying to get hitched this year, as she has already reached the age of 38.[92] However, she then spends the rest of the series blissfully

88 Fincher 2013: 16-17
89 Dickerson 2016: 157
90 Ep 11 (09:28)
91 Ep 1 (02:17 – 02:33)
92 Ep 1 (02: 45)

unaware of two suitors approaching her and only goes on a handful of blind dates, arranged for her by her mother and best friend. Her friends on occasion chide her for being too careless and casual when it comes to love, and not noticing men making advances towards her. This passiveness remains a characteristic for Chuntian throughout all the episodes, and it is only through Liang Bing's actions that the two's love life is able to develop. Though Chuntian has little to no character development in this area, she does experience some change in her attitude towards her "ideal man". In the beginning of the series, Chuntian sets out her requirements for her ideal sort of man, which include age, looks and marital status (but leaves out income). When she first meets Liang Bing, she immediately denies the possibility of a match between them, as he is not her type, in terms of personality. However, after getting to know Liang Bing for quite a while she responds to his love letter. Chuntian confesses that, while he does not fit the ideal image of a man she had in her imagination, he now actually holds more power over her than her imagination ever did.[93] In this sense, this shows Chuntian's character development, as she was able to set aside her ideals and eventually chooses to be with Liang Bing.

Chuntian's environment often comments on Chuntian's love life (or rather, lack thereof), as well as what they perceive as her high standards: one friend tells her the reason she's still single, is because she is waiting for a grandiose type of love that only exists in some fictional world but is not realistic, while another tells her she is expecting prince charming (bai ma wangzi □□□□). In this way, Chuntian is continuously made acutely aware of and criticized for her single status by her environment. Her friends, family and colleagues often give her advice about what she could do better regarding love or dating. They are constantly curious if she has already found someone. When Chuntian's sister, who lives abroad, visits her for the first time in quite a while, her first question is whether or not Chuntian has been able to get a boyfriend. While attending her mother's birthday dinner, Chuntian is subjected to intense questioning by the guests: how old she is now, is she dating someone, and why hasn't she found someone yet? Then they start comparing her to her married older sister, who

93 Ep 23 (34:00)

already has a grownup son attending university. The birthday guests urge Chuntian to also hurry up and start her own family.[94]

In response to similar comments and scrutiny regarding her single status, Chuntian often reacts with a joke or a laugh. There is only one moment in the series when Chuntian seriously acknowledges the pressure she receives from her close environment. After three failed blind dates, she sits down with her best friend and holds a teary-eyed monologue. She says she feels that she lets others dictate her life: she is in fear of her mother's unhappiness and worry and of her colleagues' judgment because it seems that no man will like her. She then discusses that she used to be so passionate about books and writing, but that she has somehow lost all of that and instead feels confused in life. This scene indeed questions what motivates and controls Chuntian's life. However, these questions are left unanswered. Her friend responds she must just be tired and needs a holiday in order to relax, and the show then cuts to another scene.[95]

For the remainder of the series, Chuntian's feelings that she's pressured into finding a partner is not addressed again, though the pressuring by her environment regarding her love life does continue. Regarding the fiercest pressure, Chuntian's mother in particular stands out. There is hardly a scene that involves both Chuntian and her mother in which Chuntian's single status is not brought up, or does not show how worried her mother is for her to end up all alone. Her mother places her daughter's love life before all else. When Chuntian gets promoted to second editor-in-chief, her mother gets upset and wonders aloud if she will ever be able to find a partner now that her rank has increased once again. Chuntian says she has simply been unable to find a partner, after which her mother immediately retorts that her standards are just way too high.[96] Earlier in the series, the mother This pivotal conversation highlights the main tension that exits in the relationship between mother and daughter and how the mother puts the blame of Chuntian's single status on herself: her career and rank are too demanding, and the fact that she has high standards hinders her chance of marital bliss.

---

94 Ep 04 (34:17)
95 Ep 14 (15:50-20:11)
96 Ep 23 (22:20 – 22:50)

This series is ultimately the story of how a shengnü such as Chuntian is able to find love and happiness- despite her advanced age, which should make her "forever leftover". The series immediately sets up Chuntian's single status as a distinct problem that she, on her 38th birthday, also fervently wishes to solve. Though the series once questions Chuntian's motivation behind her wish to get married, it does not offer any answers or delves any deeper with regard to this.

Although shown as an outgoing and ambitious individual, Chuntian's passive and idealistic nature initially impedes her finding a match. It is through the actions of her suitor, Liang Bing, that the two eventually do end up together. Chuntian's close environment also handles her single status as a problem that needs solving. They offer her advice and criticism or set her up on blind dates, and are on the whole very involved with her love life.

2.2 Shengnü in Chinese Television series: The second series

Series 2: 3S Lady □□□□ □(Danshen nüwang)

Production company: Lafeng Entertainment Co., Ltd.
First airing: 01-21-2011
Number of episodes: 26
Director: Cai Jingsheng □□□

Plot

The series starts with Gu Feifei's rough awakening from a bad dream. She just dreamt that her ex-boyfriend, Hui Zhouming, leaves her at the altar in front of a laughing crowd in a beautiful old church, saying: "Who would marry you? Don't make me laugh. You'll never get married!"[97]

Gu Feifei is a 30-year old successful architect with strong principles and a bit of a temper, living and working in the city of Hangzhou. When her company introduces a plan to fire her staff members, she boldly sacrifices her own job to save those of her staff. After being hired at a rival company, she is horrified to

97 Ep 1 (02:44-03:02)

discover that her new boss is actually her ex-boyfriend, who is now married to Feifei's former best friend and old classmate, Wushu.

Amidst this drama she meets a new friend: a guitarist she encounters on the streets of Hangzhou, named Can Ye, who cheers her up with his music. Unbeknownst to Feifei, this guitarist, with his real name being Xue Can, is actually the young president of her new company. Can Ye prefers to be a musician, but is forced by his mother to return to work and serve as the company's new president. Feifei and Can Ye two develop a real friendship, and after a while she discovers Can Ye's real identity as the late president's son.

However, problems arise because of the jealousy of two women. Firstly, Feifei's former best friend Wushu regards Feifei and her husband Hui Zhouming's working relationship as hazardous and tries to sabotage Gu Feifei's work project. Secondly, Can Ye's fiancé named Ya Qin is jealous of his and Feifei's ever-closer relationship. Other conflicts stem from corruption within the company itself, with Can Ye's uncle-in-law trying to undermine Can Ye's leadership over the company for his own personal gain.

Can Ye and Gu Feife work together to accomplish Can Ye's ambitious housing project, which the corrupt continuously tries to hinder. Eventually, the plan of Can Ye 's uncle is thwarted, and the housing project completed. During these trials Can Ye and Feifei grow closer, finally confessing their feelings for each other. However, the uncle-in-law dies of a heart attack after hearing the news of his failed plan. His adopted daughter, Ya Qin, is devastated. Can Ye feels exceedingly sorry for his ex-fiancé and, out of guilt for incidentally causing his uncle's death, nobly promises to marry her. The news of the engagement reaches Gu Feifei, who is heartbroken and plans to leave her work, friends, family and Hangzhou all far behind. However, Ya Qin notices Can Ye's unhappiness and decides to break off their engagement. Feifei returns to Hangzhou to start up her own architect company. After some time apart, Feifei and Can Ye happily reunite in a big romantic scene.

Character development and the shengnü's environment

Gu Feifei is portrayed as a very independent person. After Can Ye breaks off his relationship with her to once again get engaged to Ya Qin, Feifei reassures her worried friends that she will be just fine, with the words that she was destined to be single, and is fine living without a man. Feifei then secludes herself from her friends to suffer in silence, who sigh: “Gu Feifei has always been like this. She carries all the burdens by herself”.[98] Another example of her independent streak is that when she gets sick, she refrains from looking for help, where after Can Ye chides her for not calling anyone to take care of her.[99] She is also proud of her independence, as she tells Can Ye after she starts dating him: “Life was pretty good for ten years on my own.”[100] This characteristic of Feifei as an independent woman forms one of the pillars of her character.

However, Feifei does occasionally suffer from the fear that she will end up alone in life. The bad dream she has in the opening scene of the series testifies to this. Her family and friends add to this pressure, as they also urge her to hurry up and get married. This, on occasion, causes some conflicts within the family, for example, when the husband of Feifei’s younger sister becomes angry after he sees his mother-in-law worry about Feifei’s future. He scolds Feifei as follows: “You’re not young anymore, quit being so picky. If a man wants you, you should just get married! That’s better than being an old maid at home, right?”[101] Feifei, again showing the pride she takes in her (financial) independence, responds: “Even though I am not married right now, I’m not relying on you to support me. You do not need to continue speaking this nonsense!”[102]

Feifei’s mother also sees some fault in Feifei for still being single, in particular in her personality, as she tells her: “With your temper, it would be good if there’s still someone who wants to be with you!”[103] The series actually then uses the pressure Feifei receives from her mother in regard to Feifei showing up to her mother’s birthday with a date, to further develop Feifei and Can Ye’s relationship. The two meet up at a coffee shop, after which they go out to buy a present for Feife’s mother, and they get closer as a result.

98 Ep 25 (10:28)
99 Ep 17 (26:18)
100 Ep 25 (11:36)
101 Ep 01 (31:44)
102 Ep 01 (31:57)
103 Ep 08 (27:18)

When Feifei attends a school reunion, she also becomes distressed when it is pointed out that, out of her whole class, Feifei is now the only one who has remained single. Her old classmates react surprised, commenting on how beautiful she is and how she should be able to get any man she wants.[104] This rather sexist and superficial view on dating is repeated by Feifei's mother when she tells her daughter: "Tell me, did I give birth to you with one less eye or with an extra mouth? If you were born ugly and couldn't find a partner then that's fine, but your mother gave birth to you with a beautiful face. How come you still can not find a partner?"[105] The two go on fighting as Feifei retorts: "Mom, I have told you many times, it's not that I cannot find one, it is because I don't want to find one!"[106] Feifei does not explain why exactly she does not wish to find a partner, but her reluctance to date is clear.

Following the school reunion, Feifei goes out drinking on her own and resolutely tells herself that she does not need a man in her life.[107] She then notices a shooting star in the night sky and immediately prays that she may get married this year.[108] These shifting attitudes towards love are characteristic for Feifei throughout the series. Her attitudes range from full confidence in her independence to a hopeful longing for a relationship. As one of these shifts occurs right after the school reunion, one wonders if social pressure is behind her sudden motivation to get married. In the series, Feifei does not address the motivation behind her wish to get married.

The mother-daughter relationship also plays an important role in this series. As Feifei is too busy at work, the mother fakes an ailment so she can get to see her daughter, who immediately rushes to the hospital. Feifei's concern for her mother quickly transforms into anger, as she watches her mother trying to set her up with the doctor. While pretending to be ill still, her mother then pressures her into going on two blind dates (that end badly).[109] In order to appease her mother and escape from the pressure she is facing, Feifei eventually lies and tells her mother that she already has a boyfriend. She invites her friend Can Ye (the

104 Ep 01 (35:10 – 35:30)
105 Ep 01 (10:16 – 10:28)
106 Ep 01 (10:30)
107 Ep 01 (41:45 – 42:20)
108 Ep 01 (43:05 – 43:31)
109 Ep 01 (07:35)

two are not yet intimate at this point) to her mother's birthday and pretend to be her boyfriend[110], so that her mother can fulfil her loudly proclaimed wish of finally being able to drink tea poured by her son-in-law.[111]

Compared to the first series I have watched for this thesis, this second series provides far less insight into the workings of the main character's inner world, and how she views her single status. Even though the series starts off clearly displaying Feifei's deep fear for rejection and an anxiety towards a life without marriage, it does not delve deeper into this fear again. Feifei wishes 'upon a star' in the first episode that she might get a match this year, but in the following episodes, she mainly focuses on finding and keeping her job and the other obstacles she faces while working. The main character's ambitions regarding her career are the main driving force behind her storyline, and are also what coincidentally drives her to meeting and developing a relationship with her future match; Can Ye. The pressure to bring a date to her mother's birthday motivates Feifei to approach Can Ye, but otherwise, it is not even clear that Feifei has interest into her suitor; she only grudgingly admits she "somewhat likes him" after Can Ye insists she tells him.[112] The series does not show how exactly she came to developing any feelings for him; it is merely implied that she does.

This absence of a clear insight into Fefei's feelings and perceptions, and also the before-mentioned abrupt changes in her attitude towards love could be attributed to lazy or bad writing on the show's part. Another explanation is that perhaps the series tries to attribute it as one of the independent sides of Feifei's personality. On the whole, this series abstains from displaying how Feifei experiences her single status, why exactly she wishes to get married and how she feels about the pressure to get married she receives form her close environment. Although the series, in its first episode, establishes some plot lines concerning the tensions that come with carrying a single status that could be very promising (such as the discussions between Feifei and her brother-in-law, the manipulative side to the relationship between Feifei and her mother, or the fearful dream that reflects Feifei's fear of rejection and the anxiety of remaining single), the series

110 Ep 12 (09: 33)
111 Ep 08 (27:30)
112 Ep 15 (15:47 – 16:10)

does not follow up on this. It is more interested in developing its love story, and when it does display Feifei experiencing some strong emotion, it either has to do with the difficulties she faces at her job or when she experiences heartbreak (first after she and Hui Zhouming break up, and second after Can Ye decides to get engaged to Ya Qin). In this way, the series largely avoids the intricacies and complexities of the shengnü phenomenon and essentially lacks to represent how it could influence its main character, while merely presenting a sweet love story.

2.3 Analysing and comparing the two series

Both series start off in quite a similar fashion, setting the stage and pinpointing the main focus of the storyline: this is a story about a shengnü in desperate need to find love- and quick. In the very first episode, both series set up the single status of their main character as a problem, and also present the need to get a boyfriend as some sort of mission that needs to be completed. The two shengnü set a deadline surrounding their quest to find love: they only have one year. The message the series present is clear: shengnü of their age do not have much time left regarding love and marriage– or rather, they're out of time.

This point is further emphasized by the stark contrast between the shengnü and their sisters. The two main characters both have sisters who are already married and have children. In Series 1, Chuntian's elder sister has already been married for quite a while, and has a full-grown son. In Series 2, it is Feifei's younger sister who has her own household and a young daughter, called Xiao Hua. As such, the sisters form an ever-present example of what the shengnü are missing in their lives, and are a reminder of what their lives could look like, if only they shed their single status. The sisters also reaffirm the existing time pressure surrounding the shengnü's age, as the close environment uses the sisters to emphasize two shengnü's advancing age: Chuntian's family stresses that her elder sister already has a son attending university, and Feifei's mother tells her: "I'm worried about you. You might waste yourself. Xiao Hua is already going to school. Are you really not anxious?"[113]

113 Ep 01 (32:50)

However, both series also present a more complicated picture, as the two shengnü are shown as nuanced characters with dreams and ambitions of their own, outside of love and marriage. Both women enjoy their social lives and are happy in their careers and with the status quo. Nevertheless, their close environment reminds them that their way of living is not satisfactory. Both women are scolded for being too picky or unrealistic in their standards. Their lives need to be completed through marriage and they need to have a family of their own. While these requirements are set, the two women must also operate under time pressure, as their progressing age counts as a constant source of stress. This pressure to marry before getting "too old" is particularly high for the two shengnü in these series, who are already in their thirties.

I have identified the mother as the source that provides the most pressure in the series, and the on with whom the shengnü discuss most of their love-life with. In the years 2000 to 20004, Harriet Evans conducted fieldwork in Beijing, interviewing professional urban women and their mothers on mother-daughter relationships and communication. This study signifies a shift towards a culture of open communication, or as Evans calls it: a culture of "affective and communicative disclosure" between mothers and daughters, starting in China from the socio-economic reforms during the late 70s.[114] This form of open communication can also be found in the two television series I have watched and analysed. This was not always the case, as a mother from the socialist era was a "model of an ethics of selflessness and collective obligation who was expected to educate her children in the values of hard work, frugality and self-sacrifice."[115] The responsibilities of the mother did not include an open understanding towards her daughter's wishes and feelings, as "mutual exchange and recognition" were "absent from descriptions of the mother-daughter relationships in the 1950s and 1960s".[116]

As the 80s marked a transition from living in the collective era to a life under market reform, the "stern self-sacrificing ethos of the Maoist subject" was replaced by "emotional self-fulfilment in interpersonal and family

114 Evans 2010: 985
115 Evans 2010: 988
116 Evans 2010: 995

relationships".[117] This change occurred with the drive towards privatization and a surge of topics surrounding private life in the media, such as love, marriage, divorce and sex.[118] Evans noted that this shift in the form of communication was also purposefully carried out by the mothers themselves. They had the desire to be different from their (socialist) mothers. Those who had children in the late 70s or early 80s were inspired to raise their own children differently than their own mothers, and strove to develop a bond of trust and affection with their daughters.[119]

By the late 90s, a discourse on how to communicate with your child began appearing in women's magazines and other media. Evans mentioned in the findings of her interviews that the father role was largely left out of the "parent-child communication" discussion found in the media.[120] Fathers were noted as important for their daughters to go to for educational and professional matters. They were not consulted to discuss their daughter's internal emotional life: for this the daughters went to to their mother.[121] This is also reflected in the television series, where the topics concerning dating are left to the mother, and the role of the father is largely left out, or, as in the case of Series 2, completely left out. Feifei's father does not appear in any of the episodes, nor is he mentioned. It can be assumed he has already passed away. In Series 1, Chuntian's father provides some form of support when her mother complains to her daughter: "You're so busy everyday, but I don't know what about. You're almost forty now, and not even married yet! You'll never have children." The father then retorts with: "China is already this overpopulated. Why should everyone have to get children?"[122] But on the whole, Chuntian's father often stands on the side-lines when it comes to worrying about or meddling in Chuntian's love life, and his character arc mainly revolves around his declining health.

In regard to these either absent or non-interfering father figures, the mother in particular stands out. In both series, the single status of the daughter remains a constant source of conflict with the mother. In face of this unrelenting

117 Evans 2010: 989
118 Evans 2010: 989
119 Evan 2010: 991
120 Evans 2010: 997
121 Evans 2010: 996-997
122 Ep 01 (06:40 – 06:56)

pressure, the daughters pretend to have a boyfriend in order to escape from the pressure and constant fussing. However, these scenes are played out as natural and comical. Indeed, it is presented that it is only natural a mother would worry about her daughter's love life. When Feifei tells her mother she does not need her to worry about her, the mother reacts shocked and indignant: "What do you mean I do not need to worry about you? If you weren't my daughter, *then* I wouldn't worry about you!"[123] Moreover, the scenes in which the mother goes to excessive, almost ridiculous lengths in order to set her daughter up with someone (such as the scene in Series 2 in which Feifei's mother fakes ailment to assure that Feifei will attend two blind dates), serve as comic relief. This further implies that the mother's interfering actions are endearing and not to be questioned. Overall, the culture of open communication between mother and daughter is reflected in the many scenes in the television series in which the mother and daughter discuss the shengnü's love life.

The issue of pressure is not further addressed or explored in the series besides being presented as a normal, playful interaction between mother and daughter. The shengnü do not solve their issues with their mothers. Indeed, the source of all familial tension and conflicts in their lives, their single status, is simply resolved at the end of the series with the shengnü finding a partner and settling down. Therefore, the answer to the shengnü problem in the television series is as follows: overcoming the struggles in life, in order to find love and marriage. In both series, the topic of marriage and the motivation to actually get married is never questioned or even mentioned. Rather, the two television series present the concept of marriage as a natural necessity in life; while still being single at the ages of the two main characters is presented as something that invites constant scrutiny, criticism and the worrying of family members, work colleagues and friends.

123 Ep 01 (10:02 – 10:12)

Chapter Three: Comparison between media and a reaction to Fincher

1.1 Comparison between popular media and state media

The majority of the scenes in the two series take place in the workplace, where the two main characters are presented as hardworking women. Both women often work overtime, and their colleagues praise their work ethic and come to them for advice. The two women are also portrayed as quite ambitious: in Series 1, Chuntian works hard for a promotion and celebrates when she gets it. In a comical scene in Series 2, Feifei even follows a manager into the male toilet

in order to sell her architectural design to him. The two main characters perfectly fit the stereotypical image of a shengnü in the Chinese media; that of a career-oriented woman, who is passionate about her work and has an ambitious outlook on her career prospects. On multiple occasions the shengnü themselves stress how important their work is for them, and Chuntian once sighs that she would not know what to do with herself if she would actually take some time off work.[124] As the Chinese state media has told us time after time, and as these television series now reaffirm, shengnü and their careers are indeed inextricably connected.

Contrary to the suggestions of the state media though, the ambitions and hard-working nature of the shengnü are not necessarily depicted as unattractive attributes in the series. Instead, Feifei's ex-boyfriend actually reminisces about their lost love while he fondly watches Feifei diligently working overtime at the office.[125]

The series sustain one of the most recurring stereotypes displayed in the mainstream media: shengnü have unrealistically high standards regarding potential partners. In both series, the shengnü mention "prince charming" when it comes to their ideal type, and their close environment also uses this concept to criticize the two women and to explain that this is one of the reasons why they are still single.

Interestingly, the series do not present the shengnü as overly picky when it actually comes to dating. This is highlighted through the men they meet during their blind dates, who are comically unfit. For example, in Series 1, Chuntian meets, while on a blind date, a man who claims to have an actual affliction that renders him unable to normally converse with all women in general. This causes the date to proceed in a rather quiet and particularly awkward manner.[126] In Series 2, Feifei fervently rejects her two blind dates on the grounds that her first date, who also has a nervous tick, only brags about his multiple cars and houses,[127] and that her second date views marriage as a business transaction

124 Ep 14 (18: 14)
125 Ep 05 (03:56)
126 Ep 05 (09:15)
127 Ep 01 (14:51 – 15:17)

between his wealth and her good looks.[128] The viewer can recognize that these potential partners are utterly unsuitable, and that the shengnü cannot be blamed for rejecting them. Furthermore, the fact Feifei is not impressed by her date showing off his vast wealth and assets contradicts the stereotype seen in the media such as the dating show IYATO, where shengnü are painted as overly materialistic.

Another stereotype seen in both the television series and the state media is the shengnü being a burden to their families. Their single status is problematic with regard to the notion of filial piety, and this is also how the family of the shengnü views it. This is true in particularly to the mothers of the shengnü, who worry about the single status of their daughters and go to great lengths to help and urge them to find a match. The mothers also put them under the most pressure to get married. Any pressure stemming from society and the state is not mentioned, and the series only deals with how the shengnü's close environment handles her single status.

The series also show two attributes of their main characters that the state media use as well in order to define shengnü, resulting in the stigmatization of said women. The first attribute is passivity when it comes to dating. The state media use it as a way to explain why some shengnü have become leftover. In Series 1, Chuntian is portrayed as overly passive with regard to her love life; she is shy when it comes to dating, and she does not take any actions to further develop her love life.

The second attribute is independence. One of the stereotypical features distributed by the media when it comes to shengnü, is the excessive independence of career women. Such women are both financially and emotionally independent because of their high education and good careers and, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, the media find it hard to describe such career women in a positive way.[129] In Series 2, her boyfriend frowns upon Feifei's independent behaviour when she is sick, and her friends also want her to depend more on them when she is experiencing trouble.

---

128 Ep 01 (18:45)
129 To 2013: 2

In the end, the cultural phenomenon of women "marrying up" and men "marrying down"[130], is also upheld in the series. Both women end up with men who are ranked higher than them: Liang Bing is a wealthy businessman and Can Ye is the president of a large company with an elite background. The traditional trope of a female ending up with a far more richer male (or a male of superior ranking and social status) can be seen in many a film or series, and is certainly not only limited to China. The hypergamy seen in the two series perfectly reflects and reinforces conservative gender roles still current in Chinese society.

The prevailing dominance of conservative themes is affirmed once again by the positive depiction of love and marriage in the series. Whatever progressive statements made by the shengnü, the recurring traditional theme of love still prevails. Ultimately, the problems and tensions are resolved and both shengnü find a partner and end up in love. The many advice-columns in the state media try to urge shengnü to end up in quite a similar way.

Lastly, I also want to note here that it should not be overlooked that the television series are of a commercial nature. Their foremost incentive is thus to be profitable, and if the series were to portray shengnü to be the same flawed, negative stereotypes as in the (state) media, their main characters would not be as commercially attractive to their audience. Notwithstanding this commercial nature of the television series, the two series go beyond merely showing and reinforcing some the same stereotypical attributes that are distributed in the state media when it comes to portraying shengnü, and depict them in a more nuanced manner. It shows them as human beings with dreams, hopes and ambitions of their own that include but also exceed the topic of marriage. It ultimately presents them as more than the one-dimensional, mostly flawed stereotypes that the state media has painted of them.

3.2 *Reaction to Fincher*

130 Luo & Sun 2015: 243

I fully agree with Fincher's notion that the media representation of shengnü is untruthful and harmful in many ways, not least because it helps creating a negative public opinion that heavily impedes on easing the societal pressure surrounding the shengnü phenomenon. However, following the publication of Fincher's book, there has been an on-going discussion in academics concerning what exactly influences shengnü's marital decisions, and to what extent shengnü are (directly) persuaded by the state's actions or sponsored media campaigns.

As Arianne Gaetano has summarized, based on the findings of her fieldwork conducted in Beijing in 2008 and in Shanghai in 2012: "…the experiences and perspectives of unmarried professional women in urban China are diverse and complex. Importantly, they are not all succumbing to official pressure on so-called 'leftover women' by rushing into unequal marriages (see Fincher 2014), or marrying for money rather than for love."[131] A review of Fincher's book reads: "…various complex factors may together contribute to a woman's decision to enter marriage; the extent to which the media, especially state media can dominate their decision making process quite probably varies from individual to individual". [132]

Other studies affirm this view, such as Ting Li in her master thesis, who carried out interviews with unmarried women in Chengdu. Though a variety of motivations and influences surrounding marital choices are cited in Li's work, the majority of the interviewees are still driven by traditional marriage conventions such as the "marrying up" practice and the strict division of gender roles (viewing females as responsible for household chores and the male as the breadwinner)[133]. However, among other things, the fear of impoverishment after divorce drives many women to seek out economic security by joining the labour market.[134] This fear of impoverishment after divorce was strengthened by the amendment of the marriage law in 2011 that regulates property division, namely that "in case of divorce, the house belongs to the registered owner, the other

131 Gaetano 2014: 145
132 Lin 2015:310
133 Li 2015: 35-36
134 Li 2015: 36

party will get some compensations depending on the real situation of repayment".[135]

As mentioned before, in Sandy To's work, the patriarchal and discriminatory views of shengnü's male suitors either hindered or repulsed shengnü in the marriage market, while "parents were found to continue to exert considerable control over the women's marital choices in China today".[136]

These studies thus provide a wide range of motivations behind the marital choice of shengnü such as patriarchal constraints, unequal gender norms and filial piety that go beyond the state media campaign that Fincher has mentioned in her book.

I can add my own conclusions based on my analysis of the two Chinese television series, and how it corresponds with the representation of shengnü in the state media. The two series show a constant juxtaposing between the modernity of highly independent women that are depicted in a nuanced manner and with a depth of character, and the dominant influence of traditional norms and values. Though not part of the official state media, popular media such as television series indeed view and handle the topic of shengnü in quite similar ways. Both popular and state media offer a simple answer to the "shengnü problem": marriage. This emphasizes there is till a lack of acceptance of the single status of the group of young, modern women that are grouped into the category of shengnü.

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, it remains important to emphasize that it would be misleading to group the two media together. To view the television series as part of a state media campaign would be problematic, as varying factors such as commercial incentives and the input of the series' writers, must also be taken into account.[137]

135 Li 2015: 3
136 To 2013: 17-18
137 Schneider 2012: 50

Conclusion

This thesis starts off with offering examples that affirm the relevance of the topic of shengnü in China. Shengnü are part of a dynamic discussion in the China. They appear in the publications of the women's organisation ACFW. Because the CCP's agenda is ultimately prioritized, the ACFW shows an inconsistency when it comes to advocating for women's interests, and this is reflected in its promotion of the leftover women discourse in its publications.

In Fincher's view, the stigmatization of shengnü in the ACWF and other state media such as the Xinhua News Agency, is part of a state media campaign,

attempting to urge career women into (early) marriage. The motives of the government are twofold: firstly to sustain social stability and secondly to improve the populations' quality and quantity.

Besides the publications by the ACFW, the Chinese mass media present a stereotypical image that largely depicts shengnü as possessing negative attributes that have led to their single status. However, shengnü face a far more complex reality that draws from numerous facets of the Chinese society and combines an ever-shifting modernising society with frigid, traditional gender roles. As other studies have attested, other forces are at work that cause shengnü to face discrimination on the marriage market, such as patriarchal constraints and unequal gender norms. Filial piety and parental control exert a strong influence concerning the marital choices of shengnü.

This contradiction between modern and traditional themes can also be found in Chinese televisions series, which have embraced the popular shengnü phenomenon. The two series offer up interesting questions and themes surrounding the shengnü, but largely fail to further answer and explore. The phenomenon of shengnü is translated in a more nuanced manner from the overly negative factual text of the media articles into the popular media, though they share many of the same perspectives. The series and the state media both portray shengnü with the same stereotypical characteristics, such as being passive or having overly high standards, while n the other hand, the television series also positively depict the women's ambitions and passion for their careers. Overall, progressive messages in the series are overshadowed by the dominance of traditional themes and tropes.

The leftover women discourse disseminated through the popular media has the power, as Foucault has put it, to become truths (though in reality, they remain objective). The influence of the media discourse must not be underestimated, as it correlates to the 'broader social discourse' current in Chinese society. The leftover women discourse this thesis has found in the popular media further cements already existing social perceptions on how the lives of women should be conducted and structured. Any group that does not

adhere to these perceptions, such as shengnü do, can expect social scrutiny, discrimination and to be viewed as 'abnormal'.

Alongside this 'dominant discourse', the surge of counter-messages such as the SK-II campaign quite possibly means the start of a sort of countermovement. The reach of the SK-II campaign is significant, as it brought unprecedented national and international attention upon the topic. The campaign has shown how leftover women firmly reject the stigma their single status carries in society and the media, and it can help shed the light on the existence of a 'reverse discourse' concerning this modernising group of young women in Chinese society.

Suggestions for further research

There is much research that still can be done regarding this interesting topic, in particular the representation of shengnü in the medium of television series, as this thesis has been limited by the small number of analysed television series.

Bibliography

Primary sources:

Series 1
□□□□□□□Li Chuntian de Chuntian□Chuntian's Spring
Director: Yu Chun
Producer: Ke Liming
Broadcast network(s): Beijing TV, Anhui TV, Dragon TV
Production company: Beijing Phoenix Entertainment Co. Ltd.
First airing: 07-20-2011
Number of episodes: 24

Series 2
□□□□ (Danshen nüwang) Single Queen/3S Lady
Director: Cai Jingsheng
Producer: Chen Meilin
Broadcasting network(s): Dragon TV
Production company: Lafeng Entertainment Co., Ltd.
First airing: 01-21-2011
Number of episodes: 26

Printed References

Abrahamson, P. (2016). End of an Era? China's One-Child Policy and its Unintended Consequences, Asian Social Work and Policy Review

Chen, Z. (2011). *The embodiment of transforming gender and class: Shengnü and their media representation in contemporary China* (Order No. 1503570). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (916252066). Retrieved from: http://search.proquest.com/docview/916252066?accountid=12045

Cheng, E.J. "All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)." *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Britannica Academic.* Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2016. Web. 12 Jun. 2016. <http://academic.eb.com/EBchecked/topic/1998035/All-China-Womens-Federation>.

Chinese Association of Studies of Marriages and Relationship (2010) □□□2010 □□□□□□□□□□□Zhongguoren Hulian Zhuangkuang Diaocha Yanjiu (Investigation and Research of Marriages and Relationships of Chinese 2010). Retrieved 06-01-2017 from: http://wenku.baidu.com/view/6e1d75fbfab069dc50220171.html

Dickerson, Y. Z. (2016). Chinese female graduate students on us campuses: Negotiating classroom silence, the leftover woman and the good woman discourses (Order No. 10126771). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1816204612). Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/1816204612?accountid=12045

Evans, H. (2010). Gender of Communication: Changing Expectations of Mothers and Daughters in Urban China. The China Quarterly, 204, pp. 980-1000 doi:10.1017/S0305741010001050

Fincher, Leta Hong. 2014, *Leftover Women : The Resurgence Of Gender Inequality In China*, London: Zed Books Ltd, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCO*host*,

Foucault, M. (1978). The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality: Volume One (R. Hurley, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.

Gaetano, A. (2014) 'Leftover women': postponing marriage and renegotiating womanhood in urban China. *Journal of research in gender studies, Vol. 4(2), pp. 124-149*

Gong, W., Tu, C., & Jiang, L. C. (2015). Stigmatized Portrayals of Single Women: A Content Analysis of News Coverage on Single Women and Single Men in China. Journal of Gender Studies. Doi: 10.1080/09589236.2015.1095082

Jiang, C. L, Wanqi Gong, Counteracting indirect influence: the responses of single Chinese women to prejudicial media portrayals of single womanhood. Chinese Journal of Communication, 2016, 9, 3, 215

Ledger, S. (1997) The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle. Manchester University Press, p. 1- 216

Li, L. (2015). If You Are the One: Dating shows and feminist politics in contemporary China. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, Vol. 18(5) pp. 519-535*

Li, T. (2015) Civilizing Unmarried Urban Women in China: Authentic or Not? Master Thesis at the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies Lund University, Sweden

Lin, Hang (2015) Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China. By Leta Hong Fincer. London: Zed Books, 2014. 224 pp. (Book review) *Journal of East Asian Studies, Vol. 15(02), pp. 308-311*

Liu, Qian (2015) China's leftover women: Late marriage among professional women and its consequences, *Asian Journal of Women's Studies, 21:4, 471-474,* DOI:10.1080/12259276.2015.1106857

Luo, Wei ; Sun, Zhen (2015). Are You the One? China's TV Dating Shows and the Sheng Nu's Predicament. *Feminist Media Studies, Vol. 15(2), p.239-256*

Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China "2006 □□□□□□□'□□□' The new words of the Chinese language in 2006 (2007-08-17) Retrieved 29-09-2016 from: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/xw_zllssj/moe_1551/tnull_25472.html

Schneider, Florian. 2012. *Visual Political Communication in Popular Chinese Television Series*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

To, S. (2013). Understanding Sheng Nu (“Leftover Women”): the Phenomenon of Late Marriage among Chinese Professional Women. Symbolic Interaction, 36: 1–20. doi:10.1002/symb.46

Tsimonis, K. (2015). ‘Purpose’ and the Adaptation of Authoritarian Institutions: The Case of China’s State Feminist Organization. *Journal of Chinese Political Sciene/Association of Chinese Political Studies 2015*

Wang, Z. (2012). *Does being "leftover" matter? A study of female's self-disclosure on one Chinese online dating website* (Order No. 1532685). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1288021745). Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/1288021745?accountid=12045

Xing, G. (2005). The market, the state and the transformation of china's propaganda: A case study of the party media (Order No. MR06024). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (305472496). Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/305472496?accountid=12045

Zhang, T. (2003). *Power, women and revolution: The role of the All-China Women's Federation in China's revolution* (Order No. 3114057). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (305261320). Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/305261320?accountid=12045

Zhang, J. & Sun, P. (2014) “When Are You Going to Get Married?” *Stanford University Press. Wives, husbands and Lovers:Marriage and Sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Urban China. p. 118-146*

Internet Sources

All-China Women’s Federation
English website: http://www.womenofchina.cn/
Chinese website: http://www.women.org.cn/

Attané, I. More men than women in China, China Policy Institute Blogs, University of Nottingham, 3 November 2015 (https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/2015/11/03/more-men-than-women-in-china/)

Baidu □□□□□□□□ (Television series labels: shengnü) Retrieved 07-10-2016 from: http://v.baidu.com/recommend/tvplay/?kw=%E5%89%A9%E5%A5%B3

China’s leftover women: This emotional advert wants to empower them (11 April, 2016). Telegraph Reporters. Retrieved 29-11-2016 from:

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/chinas-leftover-women-this-emotional-advert-wants-to-empower-the/

ChinaDaily Forum 27 □□□□□□□□□□ The 27-year-old unmarried Chinese shengnü. (22-02-2013) Retrieved 22-12-2016 from: http://blog.chinadaily.com.cn/thread-828237-1-1.html

Contagious I/O Cosmetics brand creates online film to empower and celebrate single women in China (18-04-2016) Retrieved 22-12-2016 from: http://www.contagious.com/blogs/news-and-views/116130181-sk-ii-marriage-market-takeover

Dooland □□|□□□□□□□□□ "Shengnü": being choosy and woman's rights □2014-08-18□. Retrieved 16-12-2016 from: http://m.dooland.com/index.php?s=/article/id/426262/from/faxian.html

Fincher, Leta Hong "OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR; China's 'Leftover' Women". *The New York Times*. 12 October 2012. Retrieved 29-09-2016 http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/opinion/global/chinas-leftover-women.html?_r=1

Harrington, J. (2016-06-12) Cannes 2016: 10 PR Lions gold winners we like. Retrvied 23-12-2016 from: http://www.prweek.com/article/1401895/cannes-2016-10-pr-lions-gold-winners

Liu, Yiming "Do leftover women really deserve our sympathy?"□□□ "□□□□□□□□□□□□?" Xinhua Net (03-10-2011). Retrieved 12-11- 2016 from: http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/lady/2011-03/10/c_121170425.htm

Lu, S. & Jiang S. *Criticism of Taiwan's 'single' President Tsai ing-wen sparks anger in China.* May 25, 2016 Retrieved 29-09-2016 from: http://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/25/asia/china-state-media-xinhua-attacks-tsai-ing-wen-single-sexism/

Ma, A. *Heartbreaking Video lifts Up 'Leftover' Chinese Women Shamed For Being Single.* April 7 2016 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/china-leftover-women-sk-ii-video_us_570547d6e4b0537661887453

Magistad, Mary Kay. *"BBC News - China's 'leftover women', unmarried at 27". BBC News. Beijing.* 20 February 2013. Retrieved 29 September 2016 from: http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21320560

SK-II (2016, April 6). *Marriage Market Takeover (Please turn on subtitles)* Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irfd74z52Cw

Total Taipei “China Directs Media to Remove Tsai Criticism” (04-2016) Retrieved 03-01-2017 from: http://www.totaltaipei.com/china-directs-media-remove-tsai-criticism/