CHAPTER 2: Boogeyman - Bad Men and Unacceptable Masculinity
Society's Greatest Threat and Why Men Need to be Paired

Figure 26. *By Z. Chen (1516) two beggars carrying sticks from the series titled,* Beggars and Street Characters *(*Liumin tu*), Album leaves mounted in handscroll, ink and colors on paper, overall 31.4 x 245.3 cm, Honolulu Academy of Arts (2239.1: 1956) (Bianchi, 2007).*

The painting above, created by Zhou Chen in 1516, depicts two men labelled as *liumin*,[69] or vagabonds (see Figure 26). While the term may now evoke romantic notions of a free spirit who rejects conformity, in sixteenth-century China, it typically referred to someone homeless, jobless, and living outside of the bounds of respectable society. Both men are carrying a kind of stick, one a broom, the other a thin walking stick, perhaps. These objects may signal poverty, but in the Chinese social imagination, the symbol also evokes the term *guanggun* or "bare branch" (or "bare stick").[70] As we discussed in the dissertation's introduction, *guanggun* is the male counterpart to *shengnu* or "leftover woman." Both are gendered derogatory labels for unmarried individuals, yet their implications differ sharply.

[69] 流民 (liúmín) - literally "drifting population" but used to describe vagabonds who have no home or familial belonging.

[70] The term additionally signals the bachelor's sexual unattachedness, evoked through imagery of an exposed penis.

What, then, does a *liumin* have to do with a *guanggun*? In the sixteenth century, quite a lot. Zhou's painting belongs to a larger series titled *Liumin Tu*, which translates to "Beggars and Street Characters." During this period, beggars were seen as both pitiable and threatening figures. They were pitied for their poverty, yet feared for existing outside family structures that anchored moral and social order. The absence of family was central to their marginality. As seen in the previous chapter, virtuous men were expected to secure their place within a family unit and demonstrate their masculinity through filial devotion and household responsibilities of providership, protection, and procreation. The *liumin*, lacking parents, wives, and children, could not fulfill these obligations and were thus cast as dishonorable and potentially dangerous to society. This chapter returns to this *Liumin Tu* series later to show how these visual tropes continue to shape ideas about unmarried men in China today.

The social stigma surrounding impoverished single men persists. The term *guanggun* continues to describe bachelors who will likely never marry. Originating over a thousand years ago, the expression has long connoted rural, uneducated, and impoverished men who, like a bare branch of a family tree, cannot continue the family line (Buoye, 2014). Historically, *guanggun* were feared not only for their inability to reproduce but also for their perceived moral volatility. Without familial attachments, they could be lured into dishonorable acts such as banditry (Crow, 2010) or sexual violence (Sommer, 1997). These ancient associations endure in modern discourse, especially in depictions of rural bachelors, who are seen as socially and morally suspect. As one of my urban interlocutors remarked, "They [rural single men] don't think like us."

This chapter asks: What happens to a man's morality when he is unable to marry? How has the historical character of the *guanggun* shaped modern perceptions of single men as social threats? With nearly 35 million men in China at risk of remaining single, these questions are urgent. Building on Chapter 1's discussion of virtuous manhood, this chapter examines what happens when men fail to meet the moral and social expectations embedded in marriage. I begin by laying out a history of the term *guanggun* and how it has inspired fear for centuries of its use. This is followed by an analysis of contemporary associations with the term. I then analyze representations of *guanggun* across films, urban legends, and news media, using these examples to trace how public discourses shape private perceptions of bachelors within individual family networks. Finally, I turn to a case study of a middle-aged bachelor, whose encounter with me brought many of these anxieties to life. I argue that the character of the *guanggun* embodies collective fears about the failure of men to achieve "virtuous" masculinity. This chapter demonstrates both how moral frameworks linking family, virtue, and masculinity continue to shape what it means to be a "good" man in China and why those who cannot marry are seen as social villains, rather than social victims. Through this lens, we can understand how the figure of the *guanggun* operates as a moral cautionary tale in China's contemporary social imagination.

Who are the *guanggun*?: A Historical Breakdown

Confucian thought situated social order within the family. As Confucius (2016 [500BCE]) teaches: "When a single family is humane, humanity arises throughout the state. When a single family practices deference, deference arises throughout the state. When a single man is greedy and vicious, the entire state is filled with chaos. Such are the triggers of things" (p. 16). In this

worldview, harmony in the family sustains harmony in society and the state. Disorder within the family threatens the moral and political stability of the entire nation. Since marriage was the foundation of family life, an unmarried man, unable to marry and reproduce, represents a threat to both moral and social order. Historically, the *guanggun* came to symbolize the danger of unmarried men who embodied pity, dishonor, and even evil. Across Chinese history, this figure has persisted in cultural memory, resurfacing through art, literature, film, and urban legends, as the following discussion illustrates.

The earliest known use of the term *guanggun* appears in literature from the Song Dynasty (ca. 960-1279 AD; Buoye, 2014, p. 36). During this period, it referred to itinerant bandits and was used to justify the seclusion of women, reinforcing gender segregation as a way to protect male lineage (Mann, 2011, p. 37). Artistic depictions from this era reflect these norms. In *Spring Festival on the River* (see Figure 27), a detailed 12th-century street scene, women are conspicuously absent (Ebrey, 1993, p. 22). The lack of women conveys the belief that the public sphere was unsafe for them. *The Book of Rites*, a cornerstone of the Confucian canon, explicitly warns that “a girl ten or older does not go out, which means she remains permanently inside." (cited in Ebrey, 1993, p. 24). Another 12th-century painting (see Figure 28) shows women working within the home while men labor outside, visually reinforcing the moral geography of gendered spaces. These cultural artifacts, created by and for elite men, helped solidify a social order in which fears of unmarried, lower-status men were used to control women’s mobility and secure patriarchal dominance.

Figure 27. *Artwork by C. Tse-tuan (ca. 1000-1130), A street in Kaifeng. Detail from the handscroll Spring Festival on the River. The Palace Museum, Peking. From Ku-king 1981:78 (Ebrey, 1993, p.22).*

Figure 28. *Artwork by L. Sung-nien (ca. 1150-1225), painting of a woman splicing hemp, located at the Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China (VA 35c) (Ebrey, 1993, p. 135).*

By the Ming Dynasty (ca. 1368-1644 AD), gender segregation had gained further institutional legitimacy through law and medicine. As Furth (1988) notes, there was no pathologizing of hypersexual men or hyposexual women, which naturalized the idea that men required sexual outlets while women were expected to remain chaste (p. 6). Practices such as concubinage allowed elite men to monopolize access to women, siphoning available brides from poorer men (Xiao, 2011, p. 608). These hierarchies, reinforced by elites, contributed to enduring gender inequality, resulting in female infanticide and severe demographic imbalances. At times, over twenty percent of men were unable to marry (Jiang & Sanchez-Barricarte, 2013, p. 112). Many of these unmarried men formed secret societies and bandit groups as substitute family networks (Jiang & Sanchez-Barricarte, 2013; Sommer, 2015). The moral and social economy of the era thus created a hierarchy in which women became scarce commodities and poor men were criminalized for the survival strategies used to cope with their marginality.

Figure 29. *Artwork by Z. Chen, One beggar carrying all of his earthly possessions on his back. Stick in hand. From the series titled "Beggars and Street Characters". Located at the Cleveland Museum of Art (Bianchi, 2007).*

Figure 30. *Artwork by Z. Chen, One beggar in tattered clothing holding a rock from the series titled, Beggars and Street Characters, located at the Cleveland Museum of Art (Bianchi, 2007).*

Not all untethered men formed gangs. Many remained independent, living as vagrants, as mentioned above. These men survived on the streets, relying on the charity of others. Returning to Zhou Chen's early 16th-century series *Beggars and Street Characters* (see Figures 26, 29, 30, and 31), we see vivid characterizations of the *guanggun* (Bianchi, 2007). These men were thought to

be labelled *jianmin,*[71] meaning "mean people", a term that reflected both their social inferiority and moral stigma (ibid). Zhou frequently depicted them carrying sticks, a visual symbol of their "bare branch" status (see Figures 26, 29, and 31). The stick served as both a crutch, signaling dependence and weakness (see Figure 29), and a potential weapon, signaling danger (see Figure 26).

Lacking kin or community ties, these men were seen as outsiders and potential threats, differentiating them from "ordinary commoners" (*liangmin).*[72] Bianchi (2007) explains that they were considered capable of "causing harm and disruption if ignored" (para 2). Living at the social margins, they were likened to ghosts (see Figure 31), not fully human (also see Borneman, 1996). Ironically, many of these "ghostlike" men made a living performing exorcisms, exploiting the very fears that surrounded them (Bianchi, 2007, para. 7). This association with the supernatural appears in Zhang Yanghao's 1329 poem "Lament for the *Liumin,*" which begins (Bianchi, 2007, para. 1):

> Alas, the liumin! (哀哉流民)
> They are ghosts, they are not; they are human beings, they are not. (為鬼非鬼，為人非人)

[71] 贱民 (jiànmín) - literally "low people," used to mean the class of people considered untouchable

[72] 良民 (liángmín) - literally "good people," but used to denote the common citizen

Figure 31. *Artwork by Z. Chen, Two beggars with faces painted as ghosts from the series titled, Beggars and Street Characters, located at the Honolulu Academy of Arts (Bianchi, 2007)*

In sum, being a poor single man during the Ming era was marked by fear, exclusion, and demonization. Impoverished unmarried men were cast as either criminals or spectral beings. The *guanggun* symbolized social disorder and elicited fear rather than sympathy.

By the eighteenth century, under Qing Dynasty rule (ca. 1644-1911 CE), Manchu governance ushered in a wave of moral conservatism that further restricted men's access to women (Sommer, 1997, p. 141). The state implemented the *Baojia* System,[73] a community surveillance network that encouraged citizens to monitor and report suspicious behavior (Mann, 2011, p. 35). Predictably, such systems targeted social outsiders, including itinerant *guanggun*, further stigmatizing them as dangerous and untrustworthy (Mann, 2011, p.35).

Qing society was ideally organized so that every individual was "safely anchored in a registered household" (Mann, 2011, p. 45). Those who fell outside the system were treated as threats to social order, especially migrants, vagrants, and the homeless. The legal code reinforced this bias most

[73] 保甲制度 (bǎojiǎ zhìdù) - "The Baojia System" was Confucian model of governance, where moral and familial order were used to aid in political stability. It was the precursor to the hukou system used today. It included community surveillance relying on family discipline to support the state.

clearly in its treatment of sexual offenses. The law defined *jian*,[74] "illicit sex", as any sexual activity outside of marriage (Sommer, 2000, p. 30). Because *guanggun* were, by definition, unmarried, any sexual act they committed was automatically criminalized. Most men prosecuted for sex crimes during this period were unmarried and socially marginalized (Sommer, 1997, p. 170). In a political order built upon kinship networks, anyone without a familial bond was presumed dangerous.

This anxiety toward unattached men was codified in Qing law, which included a statute on "rootless rascals"[75] prescribing the death penalty for ringleaders of gang rapes and strangulation for their followers (Sommer, 1997, p. 145). Such fears were also dramatized in the popular literature of the time, which often depicted lecherous men deceiving and abducting women (Mann, 2011, p. 38). As Sommer (2015) notes, these tales were written by and for the educated elite, who knew little of the actual lives of *guanggun* but projected their anxieties onto them (p. 39). Throughout imperial history, the *guanggun* were a byproduct of gender and class hierarchies that privileged wealthy men while criminalizing poor bachelors. The penal codes, moral texts, medical treaties, and literary works of these centuries reinforced the same ideologies that restricted women's mobility while vilifying men who failed to form families.

Even after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the associations between bachelors, dangers, and death persisted into the 20th century. Ethnographers Spencer & Barrett (1948) described a tradition in Southern China where unmarried male relatives lived together in the ancestral hall, family mausoleums dedicated to honoring the dead of extended family networks. Adolescent boys were sent to these bachelor quarters around the age of twelve or thirteen,[76] where they remained until they married, usually between eighteen and twenty-six (p. 473). At any given time, between forty and fifty unmarried boys lived together in these halls. These young men were not vagrants and maintained ties to their natal families, but their unmarried status still rendered them suspect. Women, including female relatives, were forbidden from entering the halls (p. 472), suggesting persistent fears of sexual impropriety even within kin networks.

While most men eventually married and left the bachelor quarters, Spencer and Barrett (1948) observed that a few remained single and socially isolated (p. 475). These men often lacked close kin and were described as gamblers, drunkards, and opium addicts. When not barred from the village, they were still permitted to live in the ancestral halls, leaving periodically to visit brothels or procure opium before returning home penniless (ibid). Although not a universal practice, these bachelor's quarters illustrate how unmarried men continued to occupy a morally ambiguous space, both included within and excluded from family life. They were considered potential threats to women and reminders of the dangers of failed masculinity.

The 1911 Chinese Revolution brought an end to imperial rule and the beginning of the Republic of China, reshaping the social order at every level of society. These transformations offered new

[74] 奸 (jiān) - "illicit sex", adultery, treachery, or deceit

[75] A common translation for *guanggun* during this period

[76] Age when their formal schooling ended. The adolescent boys would still take meals at their natal houses, but were sent to sleep at the ancestral hall (Spencer & Barrett, 1948, p. 472).

hope for bachelors. The decline of Confucian filial ideology made room for modern ideas such as individualism and nationalism (Hubbert, 2019; Song & Ji, 2020). Foreign influences challenged the class-based polygamy that had long enabled elite men to monopolize women. The practice was officially outlawed in 1949 following the *Communist Revolution*, when the new government established the principle of one man, one wife (Zurndorfer, 2016). This reform theoretically leveled the playing field by giving poorer men better access to marriage partners.

In 1950, the New Marriage Law went further, legally mandating monogamy and mutual consent in marriage (Davis, 2014; Wong, 2016). These reforms aimed to promote gender equality and family stability, protecting women from forced and arranged marriages while also expanding the marriage prospects for men of lower social classes. The shift from familial to individual choice in marriage represented both a step toward modernity and a partial remedy for the long-standing marginalization of single men.

As discussed in this dissertation's introduction, however, the demographic and ideological shifts of the late twentieth century revived old anxieties about bachelorhood. The OCP and a persistent cultural preference for sons produced a surplus of men, reawakening fears of the *guanggun* in new forms. Even within academia, scholars warned that the onslaught of bachelors coming to age would bring about heightened crime rates in China (Hudson & den Boer, 2004). The following sections examine how this historical figure has been reimagined in contemporary China and why the image of the "bare branch" continues to provoke uneasy feelings among both men and women today.

The "Boogeymen" of the Chinese Cultural Imagination

During the first semester of my doctoral program at Brandeis, I conducted an interview that reshaped both my project and my understanding of Chinese male singleness. Xiaoyuan, a 21-year-old college student from Hunan, came from an upper-middle-class urban family and had never spent time in the countryside or knowingly met a single man over the age of forty. What surprised me most in our interview was that, although she was unfamiliar with the term guanggun, she held a deep-seated fear of single rural men that echoed many of the earliest historical depictions of this figure. Completely unprompted, Xiaoyuan explained that her parents had used the image of the "rural bachelor" as a kind of scare tactic to warn her to stay away from strangers. She insisted that many Chinese parents tell their children stories of dangerous men who lure girls with candy or drinks before kidnapping them and selling them to men in rural areas who cannot find wives:

> "...they [my parents] wouldn't say the...*guanggun*, they just say 'not gonna get married for their entire life'… so 'be extra careful when others offer you a lollipop for free … don't take strangers drinks … otherwise you will be sold to a man in a rural area who can never get married…"

Somewhere between urban legend and fable, this use of the rural bachelor as a boogeyman shaped how Xiaoyuan now views rural men. She admitted that she would never travel to the countryside alone and, if she did, she would only seek help from women. Other young urban Chinese women I interviewed shared similar fears. One told me that I was "so brave" for researching such a

"dangerous" group, while another warned that I might be abducted. Yet another suggested that I take self-defense classes before venturing into rural areas.

Such responses made clear that the subject of my research was widely seen as a dangerous demographic. Despite centuries of social change, the stereotypes surrounding male singleness, particularly rural male singleness, remain largely unchanged from the dynastic period. Much of the moral anxiety attached to men unbound from family networks continues to be directed toward rural bachelors. Rumors and urban legends compound these fears, transforming real people into imagined monsters. Many women I interviewed seemed to know someone who knew a "friend of a friend" who had supposedly been abducted or threatened by a man fitting the description of a *guanggun*.

When I asked these women to elaborate on what exactly they believed I needed protection from, they often responded with vivid stories. These narratives usually began with a woman alone in the countryside, cut off from communication with her family, and in need of help. In one imagined scenario, Xiaoyuan described being lost and approaching a man's home to use his phone:

> "[I] go to a man's house and he … lives alone and then the worst thing. … He locks the door and then … anything could happen…"

She went on to describe being imprisoned in the house and "chained to a pipe." Though Xiaoyuan never directly mentioned rape, her fear closely resembled the moral panic surrounding sexual violence that appeared in the Qing Dynasty literature, as described by Mann (2011).

Such visceral reactions to one's own imagination were revealing. The boogeyman Xiaoyuan and her parents constructed not only how her family defined what it means to be a single man in China, but also limited her own sense of mobility. For this one woman, the image of the unmarried man functions as an invisible leash, keeping her close to home. She understood marriage as the mechanism that prevents men from harming women. In this framework, the husband protects, provides, and procreates honorably, while the bachelors threaten, take, and corrupt. Her story demonstrates how familial storytelling continues to shape moral imaginations and gender ideologies. It also became the inspiration for a follow-up project I designed the following year.

Imaginary Guanggun

Inspired by my preliminary interviews, especially Xiaoyuan, and the fear she expressed even when imagining a rural bachelor, I created a short documentary film to explore the public imagination of the *guanggun*.[77] I interviewed three Chinese citizens living in the Boston area, all of whom were from urban backgrounds and had spent little or no time in the Chinese countryside. Like Xiaoyuan, each associated the term *guanggun* with rural men, yet none had ever personally interacted with anyone they would identify as one. The participants included two college students, a man and a woman in their twenties from cities in Xi'an Province, and a woman in her thirties from a city in Hebei Province. The film documents how each participant visually and verbally constructs the image of a never-married, middle-aged man (Figures 32, 33, and 34).

[77] The film, titled "Imaginary *Guanggun*," can be viewed at https://www.kim-craig.com/video

All three participants described middle-aged men in their forties or fifties living in rural villages. Each imagined a man who was thin, poorly dressed, and unkempt. Their descriptions included shabby clothes with holes and visible signs of poor hygiene. Some emphasized odor, while others mentioned dirty clothing or messy hair. These details visually align with sixteenth century depictions of impoverished men in traditional paintings. Hair, in particular, emerged as a defining feature. Both women imagined their characters with wild, uncombed hair, while the young man elaborated further, describing a man who was both balding and disheveled. When asked why their imagined man appeared this way, the young man responded that it was "because no one helps him… or asks him to clean it." This statement suggests that cleanliness and self-care are perceived as duties prompted or maintained by women, reinforcing the notion that male respectability depends on female domestic labor.

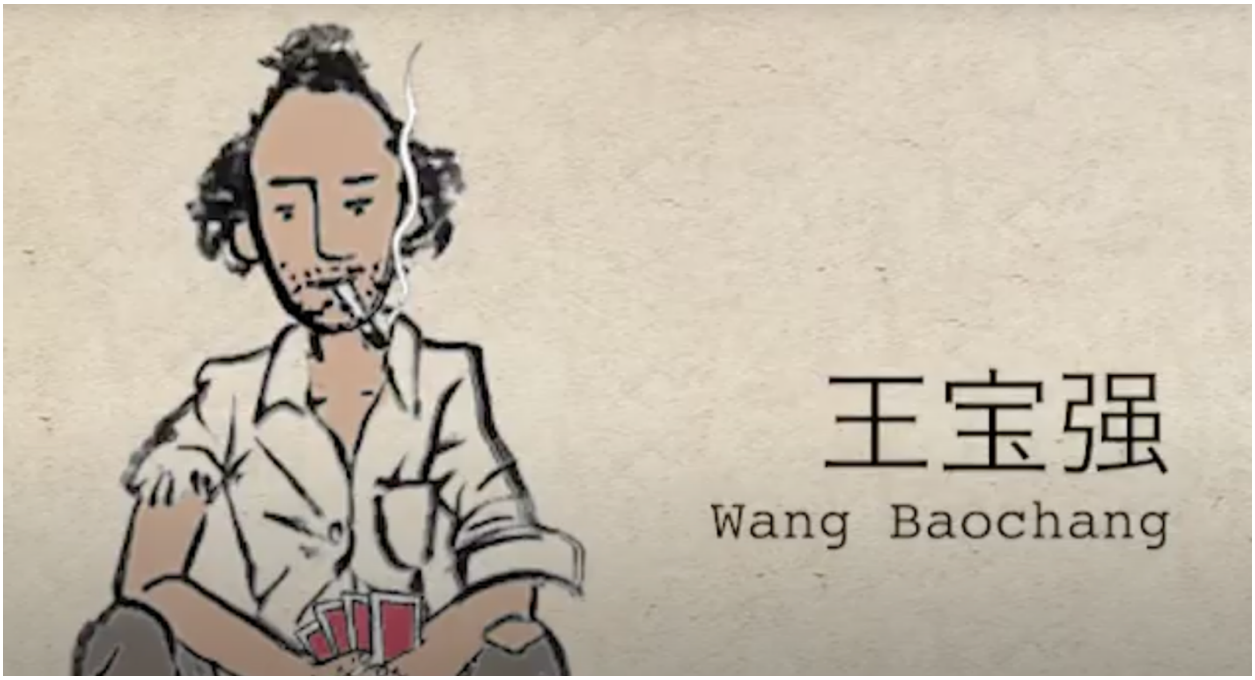

Figure 32. *Still from the film, Imaginary Guanggun, depicting Wang Baochang, one of the internalized characters of a Chinese single bachelor as imagined by the middle-aged woman.*

Figure 33 .*Still from the film, Imaginary Guanggun, depicting Lao Wang, one of the internalized characters of a Chinese single bachelor as imagined by the young woman.*

Figure 34. *Still from the film, Imaginary Guanggun, depicting Goudan, one of the internalized characters of a Chinese single bachelor as imagined by the young man.*

Two of the participants mentioned occupations, both related to agriculture. One described her imagined man as a corn farmer. However, all three spontaneously associated the figure with "bad habits." The older woman mentioned gambling, while the younger woman added that he likely

had a history of physical abuse, both as a victim in childhood and as a perpetrator in adulthood. All three participants identified smoking and drinking as central to their character's lifestyle, either as a hobby or an addiction. These habits align with the early historical portrayal of *guanggun* as prone to vice. While the bachelors of Spencer and Barrett's (1948) ethnography were often opium users, a substance still widely available at the time of their study (Derks, 2012). Meanwhile, modern drug prohibitions have made alcohol and cigarettes common markers of both male deviances and socialization (see Uretsky, 2016).

Although most descriptions were negative, a few traits hinted at redeeming qualities, or "good man" virtues. The young man described his imagined character, Goudan, as a hard worker. This comment points to the *wu* quality associated with being a good provider. Yet without anyone to provide for, this virtue becomes meaningless. The young woman's imagined bachelor, Lao Wang, lived with and cared for his elderly mother, demonstrating filial piety and virtues of providing and protecting one's parents. The other two characters lived alone, with no mention of family members. This raises the question: if the Three Ps of masculinity (providing, protecting, and procreating) require an audience or beneficiaries to validate them, can a man without family still be considered masculine in a moral sense?

Despite these limited gestures towards virtue, all three participants said they would not want to spend time with their *Imaginary Guanggun*. The two women expressed fear and discomfort, mirroring Xiaoyuan's apprehension. The young man, however, did not describe the bachelor as dangerous but rather as pitiable and socially displaced. He remarked:

> "It would be weird to see there is not really families, just men. I would definitely ask them who cook[s] who does [washes] the clothing? Who go[es] to the market? Do man actually go to the market every day to buy ingredients?"

The young man's discomfort stemmed not from fear but from the idea of witnessing a disruption of traditional gendered and familial structures. To him, a world of men without women represented an inversion of social order and a collapse of normative kinship. This contrast between urban women fearing rural bachelors and urban men pitying them was a recurring pattern throughout my fieldwork.

Because none of these participants had ever actually met someone who resembled their imagined character, I became curious about where these images originated. The following section explores the cultural and media sources that inform these representations, drawing from both the interviews and the *Imaginary Guanggun* project and wider public discourse.

Cultural Transmission: How do contemporary connotations of the guanggun circulate?

The social category of a *guanggun* has persisted in Chinese society for centuries. Historically, this figure appeared in paintings, poems, stories, and even legal texts. These days, the *guanggun* has not only survived but has gone so far as to enter academic and policy discourse. One influential example is *Bare Branches: Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population,* a book by political scientists Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer (2004), which frames the unmarried male as a demographic and geopolitical threat. Drawing on historical data from societies with high sex

ratios, the authors predicted that China's surplus men would contribute to social instability, crime, and gendered violence.[78] They further rely on biological explanations, suggesting that unmarried men's elevated testosterone levels predisposed them toward aggression (p. 192-197). When *Bare Branches* was published, China's first only-child generation had not yet reached marriageable age, yet the work effectively preemptively cast these men as a potential danger to society. In this section, I examine how such representation of the *guanggun* continues to circulate across contemporary public discourse. By analyzing depictions of unmarried men in film and news media, I show how singleness, particularly male singleness, remains framed as a social and moral threat to China's modern order.

Guanggun'er [Single Man] (2010)

Jie Hao's (2010) film, *Single Man (Guanggun'er),*[79] explicitly references its subject in the title (see Figure 35). The film centers on the lives of four aging bachelor farmers in a mountainous village outside of Beijing, where men vastly outnumber women. Much like the men depicted in the *Imaginary Guanggun* project, the film's protagonists are poor, live alone, and spend their leisure time drinking and smoking together. Yet unlike other portrayals of rural bachelors, Haos's depiction is less caricatured and more humanizing. The men find camaraderie among one another and remain active members of their community. They work hard cultivating and selling watermelons, embodying distinctly *wu* traits of masculinity, like strength, endurance, and labor, which echo the traits ascribed to Goudan in the previous section.

[78] For example the early Australian colony, medieval Portugal, and cattle towns of the American West (Hudson & den Boer, 2004, p.187-228)

[79] 光棍儿, often also seen romanized as *Guanggun'er*, which is the colloquial term in the Beijing dialect

Figure 35. *Promotional poster from the motion picture* Single Man*. Directed by Hao (2010).* *https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1652352/*

While the *guanggun* of ancient China and the characters feared by urban women today are often imagined as violent rapists, the bachelors of *Single Man* are instead depicted as embodying a non-violent but still excessive sexuality. The film portrays the various lengths to which the men go to satisfy their desires, from engaging in extramarital affairs and visiting brothels (see Figure 36) to buying and later trading a young bride from the highly coveted Sichuan province.[80] Of the four men, only Qi Guosheng was ever married, although this character is now a widower living with his three adult sons. Another, Big-Headed Liang, a seventy-year-old man, is rumored to have fathered a local young man who "looks the same" as him (0:05:30). If virtuous masculinity is defined by sexual activity contained within marriage and oriented toward reproduction, then the

[80] Women from Sichuan are thought to be the most beautiful Chinese women according to the characters in the film

guanggun of *Single Man* perform their masculinity in ways that, by Qing standard, would be considered *jian*, or "illicit."

Figure 36. Screenshot *from* Single Man *depicting a guanggun soliciting a prostitute in Beijing. Directed by Hao (2010)* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PyzBjHjfJ4

The bawdiness associated with the *guanggun* is echoed in a recurring folk song featured throughout the film. The song "Borrow Strainer" is introduced in the trailer and is repeated several times in the story.[81] Its lyrics are as follows:

> *The song Borrow Strainer is a little obscene. A little obscene*
> *It's a bit indecent. A bit indecent.*
> *Heading on west when coming out. Heading on west.*
> *Suddenly meet a ruffian.*
> *He just wanna make love.*
> *And expose her good thing.*
> *Come closer, only something dark can be seen.*
> *The ruffian is really anxious. Really anxious.*
> *Brings out something grey from his crotch.*
> *And scares the woman, who has never seen it.*

The lyrics describe an "indecent" encounter between a woman traveling alone and a strange man. The line "heading on west" may allude to western, more rural regions of China. The man is

[81] [Chinastarfilm]. (2010, September 16). *Single Man (2010 Solteros: Guang Gun Er: A Hao Jie Film) Trailer 2'30"* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sN4M8kiOd14

described as a "ruffian",[82] a term historically associated with *guanggun*. The rest of the song narrates an attempted sexual assault. The man's anxiety and the grayness of his exposed genitals suggest both age and uncleanliness, evoking the unhygienic and socially deviant imagery described by participants of the *Imaginary Guanggun* project. The woman's fear parallels the sentiment expressed by many of my female interlocutors, who associated *guanggun* with sexual danger and violence.

Although *Single Man* is a work of fiction, it offers a more complex and empathetic portrayal of rural bachelors. The film's cast is composed entirely of nonprofessional actors, each playing a fictionalized version of himself, adding a layer of ethnographic realism.[83] By Confucian standards, these men are unable to achieve full manhood because they lack the relationships necessary to perform the duties associated with male virtue. Instead, they enact virtue in partial or symbolic ways. They fight, share cigarettes, and keep each other company. They long for marriage and family but are constrained by demographic and structural realities. The film presents them not as villains, but as lonely men doing their best to preserve dignity and masculinity in an unforgiving world.

Ultimately, *Single Man* offers perhaps the most sympathetic rendering of the *guanggun* in contemporary Chinese media I have found. Rather than provoking fear, it invites pity. The scene where one of the protagonists sits alone in his house smoking a cigarette while watching TV captures the essence of this pity (see Figure 37), portraying the *guanggun* not as a threat to society, but as a product of it.

[82] 痞子 (*pizi*) - "ruffian"

[83] *Single Man (Guanggun'er)*. (2011, April 30). Museum of the Moving Image. http://www.movingimage.us/visit/calendar/2011/04/30/detail/single-man-guangguner

Figure 37*.Screenshot from* Single Man *depicting a* guanggun *sitting at home alone watching TV. The program he watches is a musical performance in which the song is about the vulgarity of the* guanggun*. Directed by Hao (2010).* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PyzBjHjfJ4

Máng shān[84] [Blind Mountain] (2007)

When discussing media that evokes fear of rural men, *Blind Mountain* (Li, 2007), was the most frequently cited by my interlocutors (see Figure 38). The film chronicles the life of Bai Xuemei, a recent college graduate from the city, who is tricked into human trafficking through the false promise of a job by a former classmate. The naive and optimistic Xuemei is kidnapped and sold to a peasant family in rural Shaanxi province to serve as the wife of their forty-year-old bachelor son. She is tied to the bed, beaten, and repeatedly raped until she stops resisting (see Figure 39). With her identification card confiscated, she is forced to live as a wife and daughter-in-law (DIL), tending to the family's land, serving her in-laws, and eventually bearing a son.

The husband, Huang Degui, is an underdeveloped character whose lack of depth reinforces his function as a stereotype rather than an individual. As *The Hollywood Reporter* observed at the film's Cannes premiere, he is portrayed as "a leering man…with bad teeth and a ubiquitous cigarette."[85] His image could easily have been inspired by the men from the *Imaginary Guanggun* project, who are described as unhygienic, violent, and morally corrupt. The violent and abusive behavior of Degui parallels the imagined character of Lao Wang (see Figure 33), whose defining

[84] 盲山 (máng shān) - Blind Mountain

[85] Bennet, R. (9 Aug 2007). "Blind Mountain" illuminated dark Chinese drama. In *The Hollywood Reporter.* https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN22375415/#:~:text=Li%20Yang%20wastes%20no%20time,father's%20expenses%20for%20her%20education.

traits were aggression and vice. After Degui's first sexual assault on Xuemei, his father congratulates him by sharing a drink and offering him a cigarette, symbolically inducting him into manhood. This act encapsulates the film's critique of patriarchal complicity, where sexual violence becomes a perverse rite of passage into adult masculinity.

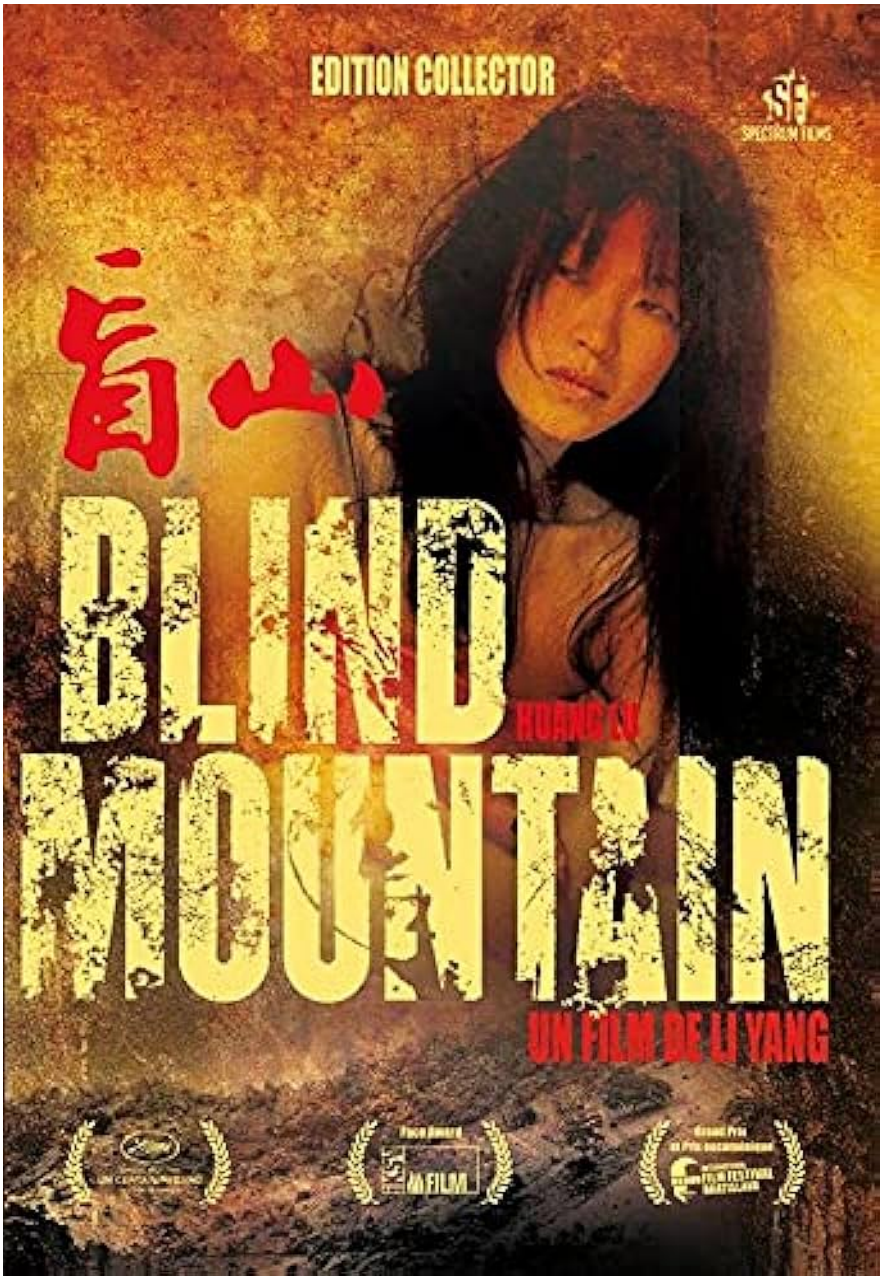

Figure 38. *A French promotional poster from the film* Blind Mountain*. The image shows the moment after the trafficked woman is restrained by her in-laws as the man she was forced to marry rapes her for the first time. Directed by Li (2007). Trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60FGITLGCto*

Figure 39. *Still from* Blind Mountain *depicting the scene in which a trafficked woman stares off into the distance as she is raped by the older rural man she was forced to marry against her will. Directed by Li (2007).* *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSBdGCfApjw*

The names of the film's two main characters frame the moral universe through which their actions are interpreted. The husband, Huang Degui,[86] carries a name that is symbolically loaded. *Huang* or "yellow" evokes multiple meanings in Chinese culture. The color is historically associated with imperial authority and prosperity, yet in contemporary slang it signifies sexual impropriety and pornography.[87] His given name, *Degui*, combines the characters for "virtue" and "expensive," signaling the moral ideals of manhood his family hopes he will embody. The irony, of course, is that his actions render him profoundly unvirtuous to most viewers. Yet through the Confucian framework of filial piety and family continuity, Degui's behavior could still be interpreted as fulfilling his obligation as a son. His family's purchase of a wife ensures the continuation of the family line and provides his aging parents with both grandchildren and a caregiver. From this perspective, Degui performs the Three Ps of provision, protection, and procreation, albeit through coercive and morally questionable means.

The "expensive" embedded in Degui's name is thus literal and moral. His family pays a high financial cost to acquire a wife for their son, and the emotional and ethical cost is borne by Xuemei. Yet the Huang family shows no remorse. Their actions are justified as necessary to secure lineage

[86] 黄德贵 (Huáng Déguì) - literally "Yellow Virtue Expensive", is the name of the husband's character in the film Blind Mountain.

[87] Similar to "blue" in English.

and social honor. In this logic, Degui's violence allows him to avoid a life of *guanggun*. The Huangs' collective efforts transformed a social stigma into a perverse form of filial piety.

By contrast, the female protagonist represents the archetype of the ideal modern Chinese woman. Her name, Bai Xuemei,[88] literally means "white snow plum," a flower that blooms in winter and symbolizes purity and endurance. Phonetically, however, Xuěméi (雪梅), "snow plum," sounds like xuémèi (学妹) or "school girl," signaling her college education, a status unattainable to many rural women (Chen et al., 2010). From the film's opening scenes, we learn that her parents have made financial sacrifices to support her studies. Her desire to find work and repay them reflects her internalization of the filial obligations traditionally associated with masculinity. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, the role of the provider and filial caretaker has increasingly been taken up by women in contemporary China.

Set in the 1990s, the film captures the era's contradictory gender politics, when women were urged to leave the workforce and return home to care for their families (Shen, 2016), even as education and urban life fostered new feminist aspirations. Xuemei's education and filial devotion embody these tensions. Whereas her parents invest in their daughter's intellectual and moral cultivation, Degui's family invests in his masculinity by purchasing a wife. Within a year, Xuemei gives birth to a son, allowing Degui to fulfill his filial duty and solidify his status as a virtuous son. Point patriarchy.

Although *Blind Mountain* is fictional, it is based on numerous real-life cases of women trafficked and sold into sexual servitude during the 1990s. Like *Single Man,* it features local villagers in minor roles, many portraying versions of themselves.[89] Tragically, one actress, Zheng Xiaolan, who plays the role of another trafficked wife, was herself a victim of the same crime she portrays. Her presence deepens this film's realism and emotional impact. Her character's eventual compliance with her captor mirrors the tragic normalization of violence that the film critiques.

Upon its release, *The New York Times* described *Blind Mountain* as "a reminder that art sometimes keeps the truth alive far better than the news."[90] While fictional, the film reflects an amalgamation of real stories that have entered the collective Chinese imagination. The fears and moral judgements it evokes are not confined to the screen; they circulate in popular consciousness, shaping how urban Chinese audiences envision unmarried men. These cinematic stereotypes resonate closely with those expressed by many of my interlocutors, revealing how partial truths embedded in cultural narratives sustain enduring anxieties about gender, morality, and social order.

"The Chained Woman" (2022)

At the beginning of this chapter, I describe how several female participants expressed fear at the idea of travelling to a rural village that was home to many bachelors. Xiaoyuan vividly imagined being "chained to a pipe." When interviewed in 2020, her statement seemed metaphorical. Yet, two years later, her words would eerily echo a real event that shocked the nation. In early 2022, a

[88] 白雪梅 (Bái Xuěméi) - Literally "White Snow Plum" is the name of the protagonist of the film Blind Mountain.
[89] Bennet (2007)
[90] Dargis, M. (2008 Mar 12). Imprisonment and Forced Servitude in Rural China. *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/12/movies/12blin.html

short *Douyin* video appeared online showing a barefoot woman shackled by the neck inside a small outdoor shed in the middle of winter (see Figure 40).[91] The footage quickly went viral. The story, soon dubbed *The Chained Woman*, spread internationally and was frequently linked to China's "excess man" problem and the trafficking of women (Xu, 2023).

Figure 40. *Screenshots from the viral Douyin video of the "Chained Woman" of Jiangsu province. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/jiangu-woman-02212022131656.html*

The video begins innocuously with a *Douyin* user visiting the famous Dong Zhimin, of "Father of Eight" fame, discussed in the previous chapter. The clip opens with Mr. Dong dressing and feeding his children on a cold January morning. The tone shifts when the visitor wanders about the property and discovers a ramshackle building behind the house (see Figure 41).[92] Inside, the camera captures a disheveled woman wearing a thin sweater and dirty pants, her speech incoherent, several teeth missing.[93] As the lens adjusts to the dim light, a chain is revealed running from her neck to

[91] Wang, V., & Dong, J. (2022 Feb 1). Anger Erupts in China Over Video of Mentally Ill Woman Chained in Shack. *New York Times*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A691118077/AONE?u=mlin_oweb&sid=googleScholar&xid=74d5c2dd

[92] Tye, M. (2022 Feb 23) Laowhy86 [username]. Chained Woman in China= The True Story. Youtube.com. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68-GpzGS7ac

[93] It is suspected that her teeth were removed to keep her from biting her rapists, but recent reports state that her teeth had fallen out as a result of untreated periodontal disease. According to Gao, H. (2022). The "Mother of Eight"

the wall. Mr. Dong enters behind the visitor, entirely unfazed, casually discussing the situation and even gesturing toward the chain.[94] It was later revealed that she had been chained to that wall for seven years from 2015 to 2022.[95]

Public outrage exploded online.[96] As suspicions of human trafficking grew, an official statement attempted to calm the backlash, especially since the scandal coincided with the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.[97] Yet each government report only deepened confusion. Details about the woman's identity, her relationship to Dong and the reasons for her confinement shifted with every iteration.[98]

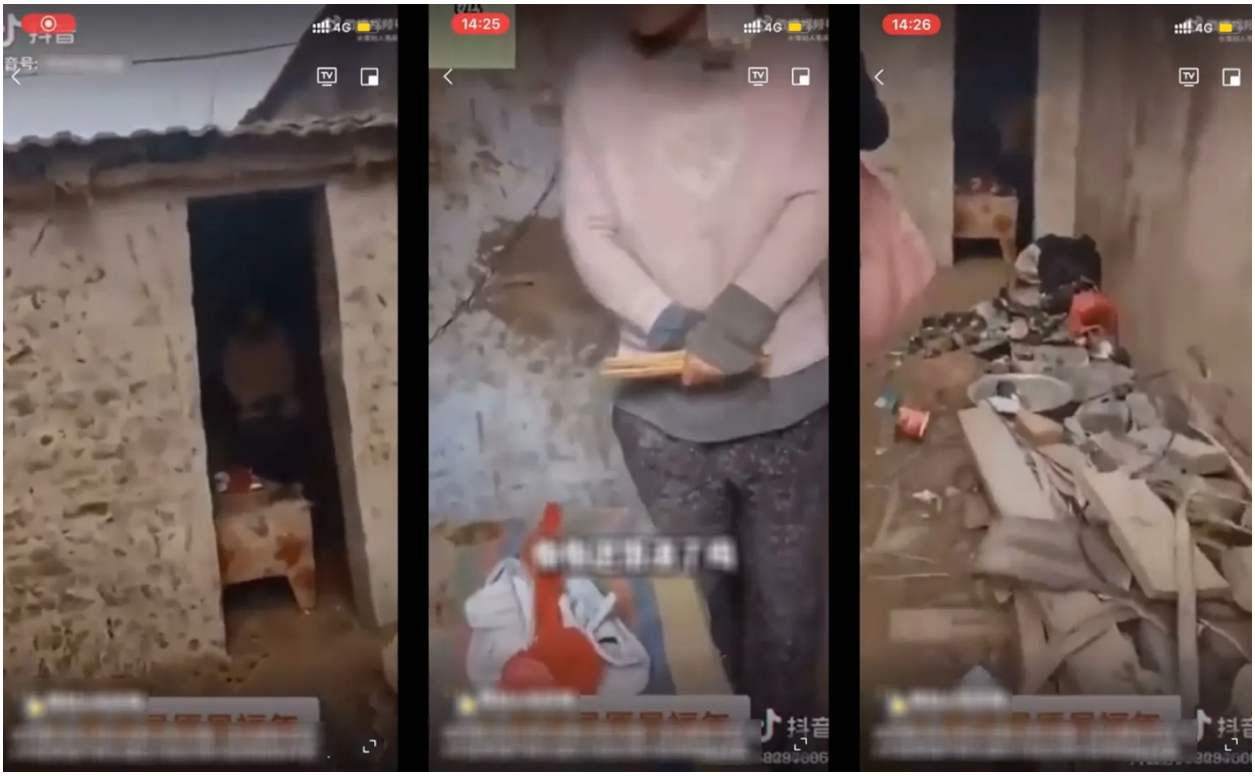

Figure 41. *Screenshots from the original* Douyin *video that revealed the living conditions of Mr. Dong's wife, now known as* The Chained Woman*. Cao, A. & Feng, E. (2022 Feb 17). The mystery of the chained woman in China.* NPR*. https://www.kpbs.org/news/national/2022/02/17/the-mystery-of-the-chained-woman-in-china*

incident concludes! 9 people have been arrested, 17 have been disciplined, and 7 heartbreaking truths have been revealed. *6 Park*. https://club.6parkbbs.com/finance/index.php?app=forum&act=threadview&tid=14578082

[94] Yoon, E. (2022). Viral video of woman chained by neck in China sparks outrage. CNBC Television. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ks-1mDCPj1M

[95] Fengzi (2023). The husband who forced a woman to give birth to eight children in Fengxian County and his gang were sentenced. Netizens said they should be shot. *Baidu*. https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1762500405524883845&wfr=spider&for=pc

[96] Chinainsights4458 [Username] (2022 Feb 28) "Chained Woman" topic kept 5 billion views per day in China/It is beyond "human trafficker" issue. *China Insights*. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hc-dJMq9gxM

[97] (Chinainsights4458, 2022)

[98] (Tye, 2022)

Eventually, authorities identified the woman as Xiao Huamei, allegedly trafficked from Yunnan province in 1998 and purchased by Mr. Dong's father the same year.[99] However, many netizens doubted this explanation, pointing out that Xiao Huamei did not resemble the woman in the video. Others suggested that she might instead be a girl abducted from Sichuan in 1998 at the age of twelve (Chau, 2024). Official reports claimed she had been chained because of mental illness "to prevent her from hurting others" (Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee & Provincial Government Investigation Team, 2022).[100] The case has since faded from public view, with no verified updates on the woman's current conditions or whereabouts.

Legal consequences followed. Dong Zhimin was sentenced to nine years in prison for abuse, and five men were convicted of trafficking and selling the woman, receiving sentences ranging from eight to thirteen years.[101] The case has also reignited debates about consent and reproductive rights, as the woman reportedly bore eight children (Xu, 2023). Some observers have even speculated about female infanticide, questioning the improbability of seven sons and only one daughter.[102]

The international visibility of *The Chained Woman* only intensified fears that Chinese women have of rural men. The *Chained Woman*'s story closely parallels that of Bai Xuemei, of *Blind Mountain*. Both women were purchased by impoverished rural families to bear children for their sons. Both were imprisoned and repeatedly assaulted their respective brides. The key difference is that *Blind Mountain* was fiction, whereas the woman abducted by Dong Zhimin was real. The fact that the story was later buried by domestic media, with critical questions left unanswered, underscores the fact that the PRC may be avoiding negative publicity, as one of my participants suggested.

The selective framing aligns with Susan Greenhalgh's (2014) observation that China publicly acknowledges social problems only after taking action to "resolve" them (p. 375). The conflicting official statements surrounding *The Chained Woman* case suggest that authorities were reluctant to recognize trafficking until there were criminals to punish (Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee & Provincial Government Investigation Team, 2022). As Greenhalgh (2014) notes, the state often transforms such scandals into rescue narratives, celebrating its successful intervention while obscuring structural causes (p. 375).[103] Because this woman was trafficked domestically, lacked surviving relatives, and was deemed mentally ill, the focus shifted away from rescuing her and toward appalling the punishment of her captors.

Both *Blind Mountain* and *The Chained Woma*n reproduce a moral binary of the evil *guanggun* versus the victimized woman. While this dynamic reflects genuine atrocities, it oversimplifies a more complex reality. Research on cross-border marriages (Feingold, 2003; Hackney, 2015;

[99] The China Show (2022). Episode 94: Appalling! Chinese Man Rewarded for Enslaving and Abusing Woman. *The China Show*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1tILRe7p2A

[100] Zhao, I. (2022 Feb 22). China's "mother of eight children" was chained and locked in the house: what we know. ABC Chinese. https://web.archive.org/web/20220208114012/https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2022-02-02/mother-of-eight-chained-triggered-anger-in-china-explainer/100797086

[101] Xu, X.., Chang, W., Wurapa, J., & Chen, H. (8 April 2023). A woman was chained and tortured in China and the images put online. Six people have been jailed. *CNN*. https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/08/asia/chinese-woman-chained-torture-intl-hnk/index.html

[102] Li, W. (2022 Feb 17). The confusing identity of the mother of eight children in Xuzhou has made the inconsistencies in Chinese society increasingly clear. *The News Lens.* https://www.thenewslens.com/article/162861

[103] Example: Zhang, S. (2012 March 9). Chinese police cracked a major child trafficking case and rescued 77 abducted children. *China News*. https://www.chinanews.com/gn/2012/03-09/3729788.shtml

Phinney, 2009) reveals that some women exercise more agency than media accounts suggest. In other cases, rural men themselves become victims of scams that drain their limited savings (more on this in Chapter 4), as was depicted poignantly in Single Man (also see Jiang & Sanchez-Barricarte, 2013; Manninen, 2019). The stories that gain traction, however, are those that reinforce the "boogeyman" narrative of dangerous rural bachelors.

Revisiting Dong Zhimin's case in light of Confucian moral frameworks reveals the persistence and distortion of patriarchal virtue ethics. Under Confucian logic, Dong, like Degui, could still be seen as fulfilling masculine family honor by controlling his wife's behavior. Yet this interpretation exposes the profound inadequacy of such moral standards in the contemporary world. The very framework meant to define "virtue" enables the justification of violence.

Likewise, Li and Janowiak (2014)'s traits of contemporary Chinese masculinity ("serious, ambitious, stubborn, deceitful, independent, and powerful) take on a darker tone in light of Dong's actions (p. 9). His seriousness reads as a lack of empathy, his ambition as opportunism, his perseverance as entitlement. Independence becomes collusion with criminal networks, power becomes domination, and deceitfulness transforms from forgivable fib to moral corruption. Each quality has its shadow side, revealing how fluid and situational moral interpretations can be.

The stories discussed above contribute to the mythology of the *guanggun* as monster, trafficker, rapist, and patriarchal villain. These depictions embody what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) describe as coercive masculinity, the assertion of dominance through force to claim legitimacy as "real men" (also see Messerschmidt, 2018). Within Confucian patriarchy, such actions can even appear morally defensible if they serve filial duty. Yet these sensationalized portrayals represent the extreme end of Chinese male singleness. In the next section, we turn to the quieter, less dramatic forms of bachelorhood, men more akin to those in *Single Man*, who remain single but are not monsters.

Sympathy for Real-Life Bachelors within Personal Networks

Prevailing stereotypes of *guanggun* are so negative that when I asked participants if they knew anyone who would be considered one, most said no. Many claimed never to have met such a man and even avoided rural areas out of fear of encouraging a "bare branch.' Yet, when I asked if they knew anyone over forty who was single or unlikely to marry, everyone could name at least one person who fit the description. In every case, the examples were men. Not one participant mentioned a woman over forty who had never been married.[104]

When discussing these men, participants' tones shifted. Those who spoke of *guanggun* with disgust in the abstract described bachelors they personally know with empathy and concern. They attributed these men's singleness to circumstances such as poverty, limited education, poor health, or bad luck rather than moral failure. The difference between fear and compassion seemed to hinge on familiarity. Anonymous *guanggun* were framed as social threats, while known bachelors were humanized and pitied. This contrast reveals how proximity softens stigma and exposes contradictions in dominant narratives of "bad men."

[104] I acknowledge that this may have to do with the order of the questions, as we were first talking about *guanggun*, a term that is usually associated with men.

- One woman I interviewed told me about her cousin in Beijing, a forty-two-year-old engineer who has never been married. She believed his demanding job left no time to meet women and speculated that he might be gay. With a stable government position and a Beijing hukou, he was otherwise an ideal candidate for marriage. Yet her reasoning frames his unmarried status as an inability to perform heteronormativity. Because heterosexual marriage and procreation remain central to Chinese definitions of manhood, she interpreted his singleness as evidence of homosexuality and therefore flawed masculinity.

- Another woman had recently ended her engagement to a man in his forties after her parents disapproved. They learned he was from Zhejiang province, a region known for strong son preference, and feared that his family's (assumed) patriarchal values extended to him. Wanting to remain filial, she ended the relationship despite caring for him. Her parents' judgment turned his hometown into a moral liability, equating his regional background with an assumed inability to provide emotional care to a wife or future daughters.

- A younger woman described a bachelor in her village who was tall, hardworking, and kind, but unable to marry because of his father's alcoholism. She explained that a potential wife would be burdened with caring for a drunk father-in-law (FIL) and neglected by a husband already exhausted by filial obligations. In her view, excessive devotion to parents drained a man's capacity to perform "good" masculinity toward his wife. The woman pitied her neighbors' situation, noting that "the only chance he had to get married was if both of his parents were to pass away."

- An elderly man described his forty-five-year-old nephew as "bad-tempered" and speculated that health problems, specifically erectile dysfunction, were to blame for his singleness. He implied that the nephew's inability to procreate had soured his personality, linking sexual incapacity to moral deficiency.

- In Shanghai, I met an older woman who blamed her forty-one-year-old son's singleness on his rural *hukou*. The two shared a small apartment, and she proudly described his filial devotion and kind temperament. Yet his out-of-province registration made him undesirable in Shanghai's dating economy. Because *hukou* determines access to resources, it marked him as unable to provide adequately. His moral worth as a man was thus undermined by bureaucratic status.

- In Wuhan, another man represented his thirty-nine-year old nephew, a guitar teacher with a modest income, at a marriage market (more on marriage markets in Chapter 4). Despite owning an apartment and a music studio, the nephew earned slightly below the city average, which made him unappealing to women.[105] His uncle emphasized that he was "not a chauvinist,"[106]

[105] The nephew only earned 90,000 RMB annually (roughly $14,500 USD). At the time of my fieldwork, this was just below the city's average income which was around 110,000 RMB (about $15,500 USD). According to (2024). Average salary in Wuhan China: Local data breakdowns. *TeamedUp China*. https://teamedupchina.com/average-salary-in-wuhan-china/

[106] 没有大男子主义 (méiyǒu dà nánzǐ zhǔyì) - literally "does not have big masculinity" but translates to "not chauvinist"

suggesting that moral virtue might outweigh economic shortcomings**.** Though disadvantaged by income, he was described with sympathy rather than fear.

None of these men were portrayed as monsters, even though some fit the demographic profile of lifelong bachelors. What distinguished them from the vilified *guanggun* of literature and film was the storyteller's personal connection. Relationships, often familial or neighborly, made it possible to see their singleness as unfortunate rather than threatening. The causes were understood as beyond their control, though each limited their ability to provide, protect, or procreate.

Case Study: Tao, 47

Men who reach their forties unmarried are often seen as unlikely to ever marry. When I began this research, I expected to meet men who, like the bachelors in *Single Man*, were victims of circumstance, kind-hearted marginalized individuals who had failed to marry through no fault of their own. My sympathy for such men was shaped by growing up around rural masculinity in my own country. Yet one encounter with a man named Tao forced me to confront why rural single men are often imagined as threatening.

I met Tao on China's most popular dating site, *Momo*. His profile showed a man resembling the artist Ai Weiwei and claimed he spoke fluent English. This surprised me, since he worked in furniture construction and held a rural Hebei *hukou*, living a few hours from Wuhan. Such a background is not usually associated with English fluency. He explained that he had once worked in international trade in Shanghai before returning home thirteen years earlier to care for his aging parents. Now at forty-seven, as the eldest son and only unmarried sibling, he saw this as his duty. His sense of obligation aligned with traditional ideals of filial piety, but also isolated him. He had no peers, few social contacts, and no romantic relationships since his twenties.

When Tao offered to come meet me in Wuhan, he traveled nearly four hours by bus. I was immediately struck by his appearance. He had strong body odor, a stained shirt, and yellowed teeth marked by years of smoking. His nose was red and veined, reminiscent of heavy drinkers I had known. These embodied cues, together with my awareness of prevailing stereotypes about rural bachelors, activated an instinctive unease. I tried to suppress these associations, telling myself that my reaction might be shaped by classes and gendered biases. Yet my body remained on high alert. For the first time in six months of fieldwork, I felt the visceral fear that many of my female interlocutors had explained to me when describing an imagined encounter with a *guanggun*.

We met in a busy cafe before walking along the river. Tao was talkative and polite and he proudly described caring for his widowed mother. Although she still cooked and cleaned for him, he saw himself as her protector and provider. This arrangement allowed him to fulfil, in limited form, some of the masculine ideals associated with the Confucian values of manhood. In the absence of a wife, he was still able to enact moral duties to his family. His labor in furniture construction expressed *wu* masculinity through physical strength, while his English fluency and prior white-collar experience hinted at *wen* refinement. Yet his social world had collapsed to a single domestic unit of an elderly woman and her middle-aged son.

My unease resurfaced as we moved from the river to a busy snack street, where he began to touch me. First, he touched my arm to keep me from an oncoming scooter, then placed his hand on my back, and later grabbed my wrist without a clear reason. The first time felt understandable, but the repetition crossed a line. When I asked him to stop, he told me I was "too sensitive." His refusal to acknowledge my verbalized boundaries after repeated clarification of my role, as a researcher and not a romantic partner, transformed my academic curiosity into fear. In that moment, Tao ceased to be an abstract interlocutor and became the embodiment of what urban Chinese women say they fear. Tao, like the *guanggun* of all the media I had consumed, had become the unrefined man, excluded from kinship networks, whose marginalization erodes the moral codes that govern appropriate male behavior.

Later that evening, after we had parted ways, he sent me a stream of messages, voice notes, photos, and even a video of a romantic song featuring a white woman singing in Chinese:

> *I hope that 50 years from now, I will still have you around*
> *Sitting in a rocking chair, running my fingers through your hair.*

His persistence blurred the lines between politeness and fixation. When I finally responded to end communication, he wrote, "You are being too sensitive. Don't worry about Chinese men because they do not dare raping today. The last rape case in China was in 2013." I had never mentioned rape. His unsolicited mention of it suggested both defensiveness and self-awareness. He likely recognized the stereotype of the dangerous, sexually deprived bachelor and sought to distance himself from it, even as his behavior reinforced the very image he was denying.

In retrospect, this encounter revealed how deeply the cultural scripts of fear of rural single men are embedded, not only in Chinese women's narratives but also in my own embodied reactions. My discomfort was not only about Tao's behavior but about what he represented, which had become a collision between structural exclusion and unmet masculine expectations. Men like Tao are denied access to marriage and intimacy but remain judged by the same patriarchal standards that define masculinity through sexual and familial success. His awkward chivalry, his need to assert control over physical space, and his inability to read emotional cues can all be understood as attempts to reclaim dignity in a world that has rendered him invisible.

Yet these same behaviors make him appear dangerous. This duality of pity and fear captures the moral ambivalence surrounding China's bachelors. They are both victims of demographic and economic inequality and potential perpetrators in the gendered imagination. Tao's story thus illustrates how social isolation, frustrated masculinity, and structural exclusion coalesce into a figure that unsettles both sympathy and safety.

This encounter was the only time during my fieldwork that an interlocutor made me feel unsafe. I do not suggest that stereotypes of rural bachelors as predatory or unrefined reflect the reality of most unmarried men in China. Rather, Tao's behavior illustrates how the actions of a few can reinforce broader narratives of danger that shape public perceptions of men with similar identities. As the following chapters demonstrate, the vast majority of single men I met were respectful and self-aware, careful to observe social boundaries. Yet the affective residue of fear produced in this single interaction underscores how fragile the boundary can be between empathy and

apprehension, and how easily individual encounters become entangled with collective anxieties about masculinity and singleness in contemporary China.

Boogeyman Conclusion

The *guanggun* represents a marginalized social identity that has long been used to degrade single men for their unmarried status. The term functions as a generic placeholder for rural bachelors, evoking fear and moral anxiety in the collective imagination. As Susan Greenhalgh (2012) argues, the Chinese states have often used these "excess men" as scapegoats for social instability, framing them as potential perpetrators of violence and thus undeserving of empathy or aid. These images are sustained through media portrayals in paintings, poems, songs, films, and new stories, as well as through everyday storytelling that circulates and mutates like a centuries-old game of telephone. Yet the voices of the men themselves remain largely unheard. The film, *Single Man* makes an attempt to represent their perspective, but the majority of depictions continue to cast unmarried rural men as social villains rather than complex individuals.

My own attempt to capture the story of a man who most closely fit the profile of a *guanggun* revealed how deeply entrenched these stereotypes are. My reaction to Tao's behavior, shaped by fear and cultural preconceptions, limited my ability to see beyond the figure of the dangerous bachelor. This encounter demonstrated how easily stereotypes can be reproduced, even by researchers who are aware of and seek to challenge them. With more time, resources, and a stronger sense of safety, I might have been able to engage more fully with Tao's perspective and better understand the social and emotional logic of his actions.

I also recognize that my own positionality shaped the outcome of this research. As a female ethnographer with a history of experiencing sexual violence, whose instinctive response to physical boundary violations is to fight, I was perhaps not ideally suited for this aspect of fieldwork. I had assumed that my past experiences would enable me to approach participants with greater empathy, but instead, I entered the field with unhealed wounds that left me hypervigilant. In this interaction with Tao, I found myself acting like a hammer, treating even subtle signs of sexual advances as nails. Although this was my only encounter that made me feel unsafe, it also remained my only point of reference, as I was unable to connect with other bachelors living in rural areas who shared similar social and demographic circumstances. Most of the unmarried men I spoke with were either younger or living in urban settings, which limited my ability to contextualize Tao's experience more fully.

Despite these limitations, my experience with Tao offered critical insight into how and why unmarried men become so heavily stigmatized and why they, in turn, are so eager to marry. The next chapter will explore how this stigma extends beyond individual men to their families, shaping parental anxieties about their sons' futures. It will examine how parents' fear of the *guanggun* label motivates their involvement in matchmaking and how this cultural urgency to marry, thereby avoiding becoming a "bad man", has given rise to a vast commercial industry dedicated to eradicating singleness.