

CONCLUSION: What's the Deal with Singleness in China?

At the beginning of this dissertation, I asked: How do single men and women in mainland China make sense of their unmarried status amid demographic scarcity, shifting gender relations, and the enduring moral authority of marriage? Beneath this question lies another: Is it possible to be a good man and single in China? The ethnographic data presented in this dissertation helps us to understand the moral, social and emotional weight of these questions.

Chapter 1 revealed that ideas of goodness in China are largely rooted in Confucian moral philosophy, which define virtues through relationships within the family. The key roles of a virtuous man are relational and grounded in kinship, in particular, blood ties. I argued that these expectations are connected to the actions of providing, protecting and procreating, and that only one of those actions, procreation, directly involves the man's wife. Confucius' 2,500-year-old texts say little about how a man should treat women outside of his consanguine relations, other than emphasizing their reproductive function. The absence of moral guidelines concerning a man's treatment of unrelated women leaves gaps that can legitimize harmful or predatory behaviors. This is backed by Matthew H. Sommer (2000), who reported that historically high sex ratios in China lead to a fear of men and an urgency to protect women (p. 10-11). As shown in Chapter 2, these fears are not unfounded. Stories such as *The Chained Woman* both reflect and reinforce anxieties that associate single men, especially rural bachelors, with moral decay and "bad masculinity."

Chapter 1 also demonstrated that expressions of masculinity in China are classed. Traditionally, *wen* and *wu* manhood were distinct ideals of male social hierarchy both rooted in stoicism (Louie, 2002; 2015; 2016). Today, however, men are expected to embody both, combining endurance and literacy while also expected to display emotional sensitivity. In the case studies of Jason and Mr. Dong, we see how men from different class backgrounds navigate this merged identity. Jason, an educated urban professional, reveals his manhood through hard work as evidenced through his academic achievements while vulnerability is expressed through thoughtful self-reflection that considers how his actions affect the feelings of others. Mr. Dong, by contrast, a rural working-class man, performs his masculinity through his caretaking for a large family on his social media platform where he expresses his tenderness through paternal affection and hardship narratives. Both men demonstrate that emotional openness, once thought to be unmanly, has become part of the modern moral repertoire for men. These shifts reveal gender as performative and responsive to social and economic change.

As ideas of masculinity shift, so too do those of femininity. Chapter 5 explored women's rising social and economic status which allows them greater choice in the marriage market. Demographic imbalances have restructured the marriage economy, positioning more women as consumers who can afford to be selective, while more men anxiously wait to be chosen. Even elite men like Jason worry about rejection. Some women, like Laura, decide to avoid marriage altogether out of fear of men, while others, like Jia, approach marriage pragmatically, choosing partners they believe can be "trained" to become suitable husbands. These examples reveal how women are redefining virtue and value on their own terms.

These shifts expose the instability of Confucian moral frameworks, which rely on women's subordination for their success. Historically, even under extreme wealth inequality, where elite

men hoarded available women, the patriarchal order was maintained because it was the same elite men that controlled women and reproduction. Today high-status women can opt out of marriage or delay it indefinitely. When women no longer internalize marriage as a necessity for survival, the entire system loses its balance. While Keimig (2021) suggests that Confucian ideals of filial piety are fading, my findings indicate that this is truer for women than for men. My data shows that men across class lines still feel deep obligations to “repay the gift of life” to their parents through marriage and children. If men continue to view marriage as the only pathway to self-worth and full personhood, then their failure to wed risks being internalized as evidence of moral deficiency. This belief drives much of the anxiety among single men and their families, who experience singleness as both a personal and moral crisis.

Because masculinity remains tied to moral citizenship and family continuity, most men I met viewed their singleness as temporary. None of the male participants, nor their parents, could imagine a life without marriage. Mothers like Mrs. Zhou continued to frequent marriage markets on behalf of their sons, while men like Jiang used every available platform to find a wife, too ashamed to visit home unmarried. Even Tao, who doubted his prospects, remained active on dating apps. Chinese men therefore, frame their singleness as a state of waihood (Inhorn & Smith-Hefner, 2020), suspended until marriage confirms their moral and masculine legitimacy.

Despite men’s anxieties, women are often blamed for the so-called marriage crisis. Media and parental discourses accuse them of being too picky or career-focused. The term *shengnu*, or “leftover woman,” functions as a form of moral policing to pressure women into marriage before age thirty. As one father told me at a Shanghai marriage market, “If women would just lower their standards, we wouldn’t have this problem.” Yet this rhetoric ignores that women have been taught for generations to “marry up” and “match doors,” and now possess the economic success to raise their standards and “shop” the market for the best deal. As I argue in Chapter 5, women have become the gatekeepers of men’s moral legitimacy, deciding who is worthy of marriage and by extension, manhood.

The Chinese state remains deeply invested in its citizens' marriage, given the implications for population decline and economic stability. It is no coincidence that the PRC was the one to popularize the term *shengnu* as part of its pronatalist agenda. While women are publicly shamed into marrying, men are disciplined through subtler, more ominous means as we saw in Chapter 2. State-controlled media depict single men as socially dangerous or morally suspicious. Such portrayals serve a moral and political purpose. By equating singleness with immorality, the state mobilizes Confucian ideals to promote self-governance and social conformity. Films like *Blind Mountain* succeed precisely because they reinforce these moral scripts, while sympathetic depictions like *Single Man* do not. In contemporary China, where the state runs the media, the morality of singleness is not only a private concern but also a tool of governance.

Why does singleness in China matter?

The way that singleness is framed in China has profound consequences for real people. While propaganda posters like those discussed in Chapter 1 may appear harmless, they establish expectations for what a “good life” should look like, reinforcing moral values attributed to specific kinship formation. Such moral messaging can have damaging effects when individuals come to

believe that their personal worth depends on achieving marriage. As Wilkinson (2012) calls it, the “compulsory coupledness” conveyed through posters, films, and other media shapes both intimate life, as well as the moral regulations of citizens.

Mr. Dong’s case illustrates the dangers of such messaging. In Chapter 1, he is celebrated for fulfilling filial obligations despite hardship, embodying perseverance and devotion. Yet Chapter 2 revealed that his pursuit of virtue through family life involved trafficking a poor woman, coercing her into marriage, and forcing her to bear eight children. Initially portrayed as a model of rural virtue, Mr. Dong’s narrative shifted from hero to villain as his actions came to symbolize the moral corruption that can result when virtue is measured only through marriage and reproduction. His lower-class status limited his options, and the lengths he went to achieve moral legitimacy exposed the violent potential embedded in patriarchal expectations. Though he was technically married, the lack of consent within the union in many ways rendered him a *guanggūn*.

In contrast, many women in this generation have begun to redefine morality apart from marriage. Freed from the belief that their security depends on becoming wives, women now construct their worth through independence, education, and care for their parents. Because women, by Confucian standards, are viewed as temporary members of the patrilineal family, their filial obligations are less tied to reproduction and extending their blood line. Several women I spoke with felt that supporting their parents financially or emotionally was enough to demonstrate filial piety.²⁴⁸ For those who do marry, like Jia, the union is defined by mutual respect rather than female submission. Jia described her husband as “trainable,” reflecting a new moral logic of what defines a “good man” grounded in companionship rather than hierarchy.

Yan Yunxiang (2021) argues that these recent shifts in Chinese family dynamics emerge from the convergence of market-driven individualism and enduring Confucian commitments to filial obligation in a delicate configuration he terms neofamilism. For Yan, unlike earlier forms of Chinese familism,²⁴⁹ neofamilism is marked by an inversion of generational hierarchy, where children are increasingly empowered to chart their own life courses, while parents’ futures become oriented around, and often depend on, their children’s decisions. Building on Yan’s framework, my research shows that this convergence is not integrated evenly across gendered family relations. The reconfiguration of family dynamics helps explain both women’s growing capacity to detach moral worth from marriage and the intensified parental efforts to manage their son’s futures. I argue that the women in this study align more readily with neofamilism in part because daughters have long been treated as provisional members of the natal families, thereby making moral and relational flexibility more culturally legible. Meanwhile, sons, historically positioned as the guarantors of lineal success, incorporate neofamilistic ideals more unevenly, remaining tightly bound to marital and reproductive expectations, and rendering their singleness especially troublesome.

²⁴⁸ Some women did feel obligated to provide their parents with grandchildren, but of those women, many didn’t see marriage as necessary for procreation. One woman I interviewed in Kunming, was 45 years old, and parenting a 3-year-old son on her own. She had never been married and conceived with a male friend who does not take any parental responsibility: “It was important to me to be a mother, but not a wife.”

²⁴⁹ According to Yan (2021), “familism refers to the value system and social practices of the family in many traditional societies,” emphasizing “the primacy of family interests over the interests of individual family members and of loyalty to the family over allegiance to any outside social organization” (p. 15).

Yet, for men and women both, the broader social landscape of singleness remains marked by fear, anxiety, and suspicion. Women like Laura and Xiaoyuan fear male violence and the burden of domesticity. Parents fear dying before ensuring their children's marriage, while men fear being forever single and therefore incomplete. These collective anxieties create what many experience as a moral crisis in masculinity and family life.

Under capitalism, fear itself becomes profitable. Where this is a problem, by-god, there is someone who can sell you the cure. As Chapters 3 and 4 showed, industries have emerged to exploit the anxieties surrounding singleness. Parents employ matchmakers, attend marriage markets, and even use specially catered dating apps to secure partners for their adult children. One step removed from arranged marriages, parents offer their child a short list of suitors, believing that a successful marriage reflects their own virtue. Many adult children, meanwhile, turn to commercial dating services and social media platforms that promise companionship but often deliver scams, heartbreak, and financial loss, as we saw with Mr. Zhou and his son's Vietnamese mail-order bride. These industries capitalize on the moral panic of being unmarried, transforming virtue into a commodity to be bought, sold, and even exploited for profit.

Economic inequality further shapes who can access moral legitimacy through marriage. Men with financial resources enjoy greater romantic prospects, as wealth enhances both social desirability and access to matchmaking resources. As Kam Louie (2016) argues, Chinese masculinity depends on the interplay between *wen* and *wu*, yet the ability to embody both is class-dependent. Returning to Jason and Mr. Dong, both can perform a socially recognized version of manhood through hard work and endurance, yet it is the man with the Ph.D., not the man with the dirt floor, who is considered more desirable. Chapter 2 demonstrates that Mr. Dong's illegal actions to secure a wife reflect the desperation of a man excluded from moral completion due to class. Marriage, wealth, and virtue remain intertwined, reinforcing systemic inequality.

The lack of accessible pathways to virtue has also eroded male sociality. Drawing on Sedgwick's (1985) theory that men form bonds through the exchange of women, I hypothesized that demographic scarcity would inspire new forms of male kinship. Instead, I found that single men often withdrew in shame, avoiding friendships. Without women to "trade," these men struggled to form solidarity, highlighting how deeply heteronormative marriage and familial ties shape social belonging.

An example of this retreat is Jiang from Chapter 4. He describes having one "friend", Yize, whom he met at a marriage market, with whom he occasionally exchanges tips or opportunities to meet women. However, when asked whether they ever met outside the market or discussed anything beyond strategies to find a wife, he said no. It was, as I describe it, a reverse Bechdel test, where two men only ever talk about women. Jiang did not even know the man's full name. A similar dynamic appeared in the life of Ru, the lesbian participant from Chapter 5, who lived a bachelor-like existence. She also lacked close friends, spending most of her time with cousins or aunts. The only non-kin relationships she maintained were with me, which required my active effort to sustain, and whatever romantic partner she had at a given time. When she was dating, our friendship would pause as her girlfriends were often jealous or suspicious of her closeness with a non-blood-related woman. These examples suggest that in contemporary China, those who perform masculinity and live outside of the norms of marriage struggle to build sustaining

friendships. My findings therefore support and extend Sedgwick's (1985) theory of homosocial bonding by showing that, in this context, the absence of women as conduits of exchange does not strengthen bonds, but can weaken them. This raises a larger question about how friendship itself is understood and valued in China, where kinship and romantic ties remain the dominant sites of intimacy.

Ultimately, this research reveals that masculinity in China is inherently relational. Men's sense of virtue and personhood depends on how well they fulfill obligation to their natal families, particularly through marriage and reproduction. As David Graeber noted, "there is no area of human life, anywhere, where one cannot find self-interested calculations," implying that all social acts contain self-interest. (2001, as cited in Keimig, 2021, p. 43). I argue, however, that in China, the self is always relational, meaning that any action a man performs for personal validation also upholds the honor of those connected to him. Virtue, therefore, is a collective project that binds individual morality to the family and, by extension, the nation.

This frame of male virtue and relationality explains why singlism, the stigmatization of single people, is especially severe for men. As Bella DePaulo (2011) notes, single individuals often face moral suspicion. But in China, this suspicion is gendered. Throughout my research, many have asked how Chinese bachelors compare to Western "incels."²⁵⁰ My findings suggest key differences. Chinese bachelors may share incels' grievances about women's pickiness, economic barriers, or the practice of hypergamy, but they do not form online subcultures of misogyny and reject future women for rejecting them.²⁵¹ Instead, moral pressures to marry keep them engaged in the pursuit of partnership, even in the face of failure. Ironically, it is this very pressure, along with familial connection and a habit of self-isolation rather than forming community, that prevents collective rebellion and joining the so-called "manosphere."

This research ultimately demonstrates that Confucian traditions of masculinity and virtue, while resilient, are also flexible. Across history, marriage in China has adapted to its contexts, from arranged marriages and concubinages to dating apps and marriage markets. Through all of this change, the moral weight of Confucianism endures. The danger lies not in tradition itself but in its patriarchal rigidity. The findings suggest that greater elasticity in masculinity (Cao, 2021) may offer a path forward. If a man's moral worth can be decoupled from dominance and marriage, and the violence sometimes created as collateral damage on the path to virtue, both men and women might envision new ways of being good, virtuous, and whole.

What is to be done with this data?

Now that we have reviewed the findings of this dissertation, let us return to the question posed at the beginning of the chapter: Is it possible to be both single and good as a man in China? My answer is "Yes, ... but" only if definitions of male virtue are reframed. Goodness is inherently subjective, and its measurements depend on the moral frameworks available within a society. To

²⁵⁰ *Incels* - or "involuntary celibates," is a term used to describe the online community of single men who blame women for their singleness and are often described as dangerous and violent toward women (See Bates, 2021; Sugiura, 2021; Vink et al., 2024)

²⁵¹ The incel community often blame their singleness on a lack of LMS, "looks, money, status" (Sugiura, 2021, p. 77).

make space for unmarried men to be recognized as virtuous, either the cultural definition of family must expand to include non-blood-based relationships, or the criteria for moral personhood must shift beyond marriage and procreation. Reframing these moral logics could open pathways to new forms of fulfillment for men.

However, none of the men I met were attempting to subvert the frameworks that tie male virtue to marriage. Instead, they reinforced them. Men like Tao tried to distance themselves from the stigma of the *guanggun* by emphasizing their difference from “bad” bachelors, thereby reproducing the very moral hierarchies that isolate them. His insistence that “Chinese men don’t rape,” for instance, did not dismantle the stereotype but reanimated it, demonstrating how difficult it is to escape these deeply ingrained narratives.

Women also reproduce these moral scripts, often associating unmarried men with danger. Xiaoyuan’s description associated them with “Boogeymen,” while Laura imagined marriage itself as a kind of curse that transformed men from kind partners into monsters, not unlike “Jekyll and Hyde.” Only a few interlocutors, like Jia and Ru, managed to subvert these definitions of masculinity. Jia’s decision to marry Bowen precisely because he was gentle, submissive, and uninterested in patriarchal authority challenged the traditional model of male dominance as a prerequisite for marriage.²⁵² Likewise, Ru, a masculine-presenting lesbian, performed the traditional masculine duties of providing and protecting but refused the imperative to procreate, instead investing her care into her significantly younger siblings, whom she plans on relying on in her old age. Her family configurations reimagine filial duty while preserving its moral logic, suggesting how gendered expectations might evolve without collapsing the system entirely.

Ru’s case also points to an alternative model of virtue through what Jack Halberstam (2011) calls *The Queer Art of Failure*. Halberstam argues that failure to conform can generate new possibilities for being. If Chinese men could relate their attachment to marriage as the only marker of success and goodness, or rather, embrace their failure of it, they too might redefine virtue on their own terms. In the words of Halberstam: “if success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards” (p. 3) that could save us/them from “the hooks of hegemony” (p. 2). Chinese women, as we have seen, are already doing this by finding meaning and moral worth in their careers, independence, and care for aging parents. Men could do the same if they were able to detach virtue from patriarchal obligation.

Other queer theorists have long shown that kinship can extend beyond the nuclear family. Kath Weston’s (1997) work on chosen family demonstrates that people across societies build intimacy through shared commitments rather than shared bloodlines. Similar patterns emerge in intentional communities (Carsten, 2000; Ghodsee, 2023), migrant communities (Decimo & Gribaldo, 2017), racial and religious groups (Dickerson-Cousin, 2014), and military personnel (Græger, 2018). These models could provide alternative frameworks for filial performance in China. If men could demonstrate virtue through protecting, providing for, or mentoring others beyond their natal families, the moral structure could remain intact while its membership expands.

²⁵² Whether or not Bowen associated this with his moral value is unknown as I did not interview him for this project

One example of such reimagined kinship comes from Casey James. Miller's (2023) study of *quanzi*²⁵³ ("inner circle") among queer men in Northern China, who form kinship-like networks grounded in shared struggles and political passions rather than lineage. While my interlocutors did not engage in similar collectives, Miller's research offers a potential direction. Rather than retreating into isolation, as many of the single men in this study did, future generations might experiment with creating supportive networks that sustain belonging outside of heteronormative kinship models. However, as my data suggests, there are risks in how these communities might form and be perceived, given the political and social stigma that continues to surround bachelorhood.

Future research should extend beyond the urban context into rural regions, where the *guanggun* stereotype originates. My limited access to rural sites meant that I could not speak directly with older, unmarried rural men whose experiences might diverge significantly from those of younger or urban bachelors. How do men who have fully aged out of the marriage market understand their moral worth? Have they found alternative routes to fulfillment, or do they also remain in a perpetual state of "waithood"? Similarly, divorced men offer another site of inquiry. Those with children often retain their sense of moral adulthood, suggesting that fatherhood may compensate for marital failure. Comparative ethnographic work could clarify whether moral redemption is tied more to marriage or to procreation.

From a policy perspective, structural change is needed to expand the moral possibilities available to single men. Legal reforms could broaden the definitions of family to include non-heteronormative partnerships, further extend adoption rights to single men (Adoption Law of the People's Republic of China, 2025), and strengthen state-sponsored elder care systems. Such measures would allow men to perform filial duty and moral citizenship outside of the current parameters of kin-making. Expanding immigration pathways could also reduce the conditions that lead to trafficking by allowing for more opportunities for consensual intercultural marriage.

Ultimately, I argue that singleness is not the real problem behind the so-called crisis. It is the ideology that defines unmarried men as morally deficient. Structural limitations prevent alternative family forms from being recognized or supported. If Confucian virtue continues to rest on patriarchal assumptions of male dominance and female dependence, the crisis will persist despite sex/gender ratios. As Susan Greenhalgh (2012) suggests, reframing gender imbalance through humanitarian values could reduce stigma and prevent future violence. Following her lead, I propose a campaign of "Care for Bachelors," modelled on earlier "Care for Girls" initiatives (also see Jiang, 2013; Wang, 2009), to encourage compassion rather than fear toward single men.

The deeper issue, however, is patriarchy itself. Systems that demand male superiority ultimately harm men as well as women. As global discussions of "male loneliness" and incel culture reveal, patriarchal scripts confine everyone within narrow definitions of success. In China, as elsewhere, a more gender-equitable social order would not only empower women but also free men from the moral pressure that binds their worth to marriage. The system that divides men into virtuous husbands and "bare branches" ensures that men are judged by their ability to marry and control women, while women are valued according to their conformity to that hierarchy. Letting go of the patriarchal logic that requires male dominance would also dissolve the need for hypergamous

²⁵³ 圈子 (quānzǐ) - literally "circle"

practices and the constant need to sort partners by “matching doors”. Only when worth is no longer measured through these gendered hierarchies can both men and women be free.