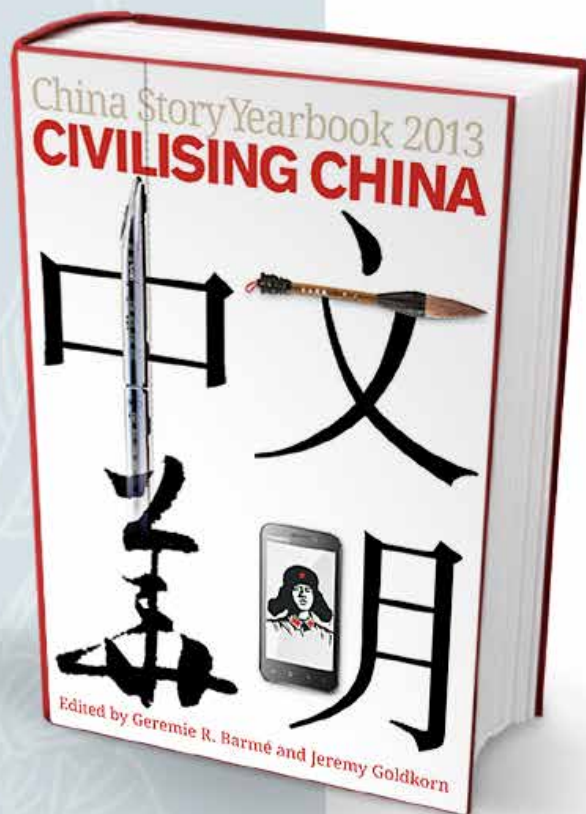


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FORUM

## TINY TIMES FOR WOMEN

Excerpt from

*CHINA STORY YEARBOOK 2013*

**CIVILISING CHINA**

文明中华

EDITED BY

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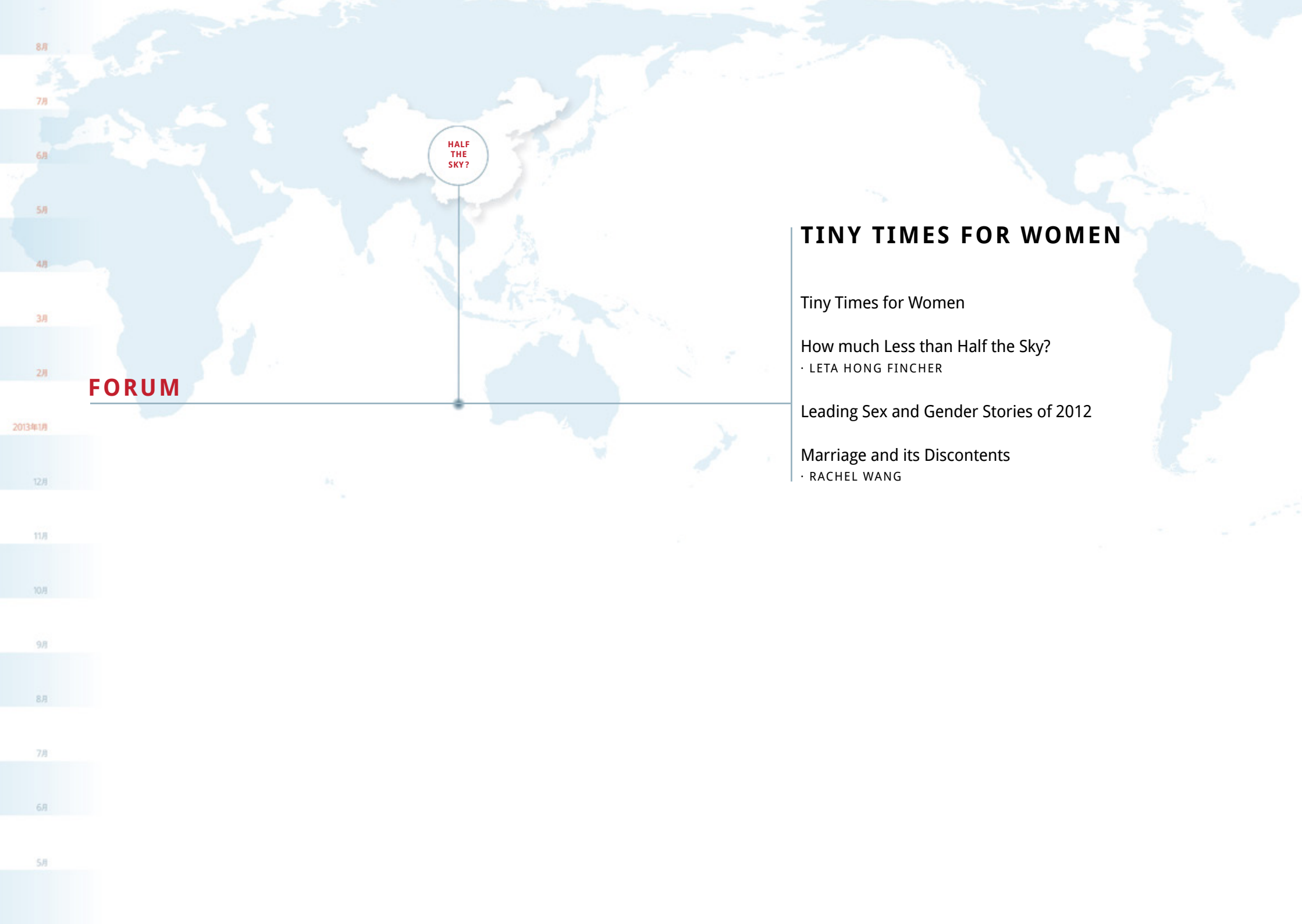
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**A**s China becomes wealthier and more confident on the global stage, it also expects to be respected and accommodated as a major global force — and as a formidable civilisation. Through a survey and analysis of China's regional posture, urban change, social activism and law, mores, the Internet, history and thought — in which the concept of 'civilising' plays a prominent role — *China Story Yearbook 2013* offers insights into the country today and its dreams for the future.



Chinese football fans, Guiyang, June 2011.  
Source: ImagineChina



## TINY TIMES FOR WOMEN

Tiny Times for Women

How much Less than Half the Sky?

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Leading Sex and Gender Stories of 2012

Marriage and its Discontents

· RACHEL WANG

FORUM

HALF  
THE  
SKY?

8月

7月

6月

5月

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2013年1月

12月

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10月

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## TINY TIMES FOR WOMEN

China does not lack notable female entrepreneurs, publishers, social activists, educators or commentators. Prominent businesswomen include Zhang Lan (b.1958), founder of the South Beauty (*Qiaojiangnan* 俏江南) chain of restaurants and Dong Mingzhu (b.1956), CEO of GREE air conditioning company. Hu Shuli (b.1953), the financial journalist at the helm of Caixin Media has an international reputation that has seen her win awards including the *World Press Review's* 2003 International Editor of the Year and a listing in the US *Foreign Policy*

magazine's 2008 as one of the world's top one hundred intellectuals alongside Noam Chomsky and Umberto Eco. The independent journalist and historian Dai Qing (b.1941) was one of the forces behind China's nascent environmental movement in the mid-1980s and continues her tireless advocacy for human rights, democracy and environmental protection. Hong Huang (b.1962) is a well-known media mogul, microblogger and television host whose projects include the high-profile promotion of Chinese design brands. The list is long. Yet Chinese women's



**Zhang Lan.**  
Source: China-detail.com



**Dong Mingzhu.**  
Source: Wikimedia Commons



**Hu Shuli.**  
Source: Asia-society.org



**Dai Qing.**  
Photo: Ian Elwood



**Hong Huang.**  
Photo: Benjamin Chiang



**Wu Yi.**  
Source: China-detail.com



**Xu Jinglei.**  
Source: Chineseidol.info

**Guo Meimei Baby.**  
Source: Weibo.com

**Zhou Rui Emily.**  
Source: Mop.com

representation at the highest levels of the Chinese political sphere has rarely been more than token. There has not been a woman in the politburo since Wu Yi (b.1938 and named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in the world in 2004) retired from her position as Vice-Premier on the State Council in 2008.

The last few years have also arguably seen a stumble backwards when it comes to the representation of women in the media and on the Internet. The most prominent Chinese Internet celebrity of the first decade of the twenty-first century was, arguably, Xu Jinglei, an unmarried film director and actor. After long-form blogging became the medium

*du jour* from 2005 to 2008, tens of millions fans logged onto Xu's blog daily for her independent, down-to-earth take on life and her willingness to share non glam photographs with her fans. In 2010, Xu directed *Go La La Go! (Du La La shengzhi ji 杜拉拉升职记)*, a film about a young professional woman's struggle to balance work and life.

But the era of the microblog that started with the launch of Sina Weibo in 2009 is also one that seems to celebrate brashness and materialism, and the subservience and sexualisation of women over the sort of qualities that have brought the likes of Hu Shuli, Dai Qing and other such women to prominence. Although there are still inde-



Film poster of *Tiny Times*, directed and produced by Guo Jingming.  
Source: Onlylady.com

pendent female voices of authority and intelligence, the ones who appear to get most of the attention in this new 'micro' climate are women such as Guo Meimei Baby (see the 2012 *Yearbook*) and Zhou Rui Emily (see Chapter 7), mistresses who boast of gifts from their rich lovers. Perhaps most notorious was Ma Nuo, a twenty-year-old female contestant on a TV dating show in 2010 who famously said that she would 'rather cry in the back of a BMW than laugh on the back of a bicycle' (*Ning zai Baoma cheili ku, ye bu zai zixingcheshang xiao 宁在宝马车里哭，也不在自行车上笑*).

In contrast to Xu Jinglei's 2010 film, the biggest hit film with young women in early 2013 was *Tiny Times (Xiao shi-dai 小时代)*, directed and produced by male pulp novelist Guo Jingming. *Tiny Times* depicts four young women whose main aim in life appears to be snagging

a rich husband. Writing in the *Atlantic* magazine Ying Zhu and Frances Hisgen noted that the women's 'professional aspirations amount to serving men with competence' and that the only 'enduring relationship' in the superficial world portrayed by the film is 'the chicks' relationship with material goods'. Zhu and Hisgen call the male-scripted film 'a great leap backward for women' that portrays 'a twisted male narcissism and a male desire for patriarchal power and control over female bodies and emotions misconstrued as female longing'.



## HOW MUCH LESS THAN HALF THE SKY?

Leta Hong Fincher

*Leta Hong Fincher, a former journalist, is a PhD candidate in sociology at Tsinghua University in Beijing who is conducting research on the economic effects of sexism and the changing place of women in Chinese society and author of the book 'Leftover' Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China. The following is a transcript of a brief interview with Hong Fincher conducted by Jeremy Goldkorn in May 2013.*

**JG:** *Is Chinese society going backwards when it comes to the treatment of women and what would you say are the major areas where women's status or conditions are deteriorating?*

**LHF:** There are many, many areas in which women's status is moving backwards. I will start with my own research. I found that women have been shut out of arguably the biggest accumulation of real estate wealth in history. In the past decade and a half,

since the privatisation of housing and the real estate boom in China, China has created over US\$27 trillion in residential real estate wealth. Most of that wealth is in men's names. Parents tend to buy homes for sons and not for daughters. A lot has been written about the pressure on men to provide a home upon marriage, but what I found is the pressure is equally intense on women and so there are a lot of women who transfer their life savings and all of their assets over to the man – and it



may not even be the husband, it may just be a boyfriend – in order to finance the purchase of this extremely valuable home.

So what you are seeing is the creation of this gigantic gender wealth gap, and the consequences of this gender wealth inequality could last for generations, because there is no tax on property and there is no gift tax imposed on parents buying homes for their children. So that's one major area of economic inequality between women and men.

There has been a lot of research on other areas. The gender income gap is widening, and labour force participation among women is declining sharply, particularly in the cities. There has also been this law that was amended by China's Supreme People's Court in August 2011, a new judicial interpretation of the Marriage Law. Before this, basically marital property was common property, but now essentially whoever buys the home and whose name is on the deed gets to keep the home in the event of a divorce. This is a severe setback to married women's property rights that has consequences extending far beyond merely who gets the property in the event of a divorce,

because whoever has greater wealth in the marriage has a lot more bargaining power in all areas of the marriage.

That relates to another very serious problem for women, which is the pervasiveness of domestic violence. I do not think that we have the evidence to say that domestic violence has necessarily worsened, but it certainly has not gotten any better and there has been no progress whatsoever in introducing a national law that would really prevent and punish perpetrators of domestic violence. This is a very serious problem, especially when it comes to property rights.

There are all sorts of other areas. Human Rights Watch came out with this report recently about the proliferation of prostitution in the last few decades and major abuses of all of these workers in the sex trade.

All of the problems with creation of inequality of wealth and income that relate to all Chinese people hit women especially hard.

Then there's the campaign against leftover women! In 2007, the Women's Federation defined the new term, *shengnü* 剩女 or 'leftover women'. The Ministry of Education adopt-



Giant bird cage.  
Photo: Ernie Emop

ed it as part of China's official lexicon. And ever since then, the state media has been stigmatising urban educated women over the age of twenty-seven who are still single, and so in all the state media you see columns, news reports, supposedly objective social science surveys, cartoons, and TV shows all basically hurling invective at women who choose to pursue higher education and remain single beyond the age of twenty-seven.

What I have found is that this is not merely a cultural phenomenon, it has very drastic economic consequences and relates back to my topic of real estate wealth. Because of the intense pressure on young women to get married, a lot of young women rush into marriage with the wrong man. I find that a lot of times these young women come under such pressure when they're getting married and buying a home. It can be a very complicated financial transaction. It usually involves the parents of both the bride and the groom, and there



'Women hold up half the sky, manage the landscape to give it a new face.' Mao-era propaganda poster from Liaoning province, April 1975.  
Source: Creativesomerset.com

can be heated arguments over whose name is going to be registered on the property deed. Time and time again I have found young women who are unwilling to walk away from an unequal financial arrangement because they are so anxious about not finding another husband, and so I think that this 'leftover women' campaign has also contributed to the creation of the enormous gender wealth gap.

**JG:** Do you see any remnants of the Maoist 'women hold up half the sky' mentality and was that ever even a real thing? Has there been any good news? Has there been any legislation that has benefited women?

**LHF:** Well, with regards to legislation, there has not been any that I am aware of that has really helped women. I mean it is possible that there might be something out there, but I certainly have not heard of it. The positive news is that women are getting educated: you have record numbers of women getting a college education, and I believe that there may be about twenty-five percent more university educated urban women now than there were in 2000. That is very good news.

But I believe that that is partly the reason why the government rolled out this leftover women campaign. Because women are getting so much more educated, they are choosing to pursue their careers, and naturally when a woman wants to advance her education and advance her career, she wants to delay marriage. So I think this leftover women campaign is in large part a backlash against the recent gains of women in education and

in their early careers. And this is related as well to the one-child policy. A lot of scholars have done research showing that as a result of the one-child policy, parents with only one daughter tend to invest a lot in her education, because the daughter does not need to compete with a brother for parental investment. But what you are not seeing is that increased education translating into economic gains when women enter the workforce and particularly when they get married.



Two young women at an Internet cafe: 'There are no decent men out there.' The other replies: 'I will take one if he comes free of charge.'  
Cartoon in response to campaign against 'leftover women' of the Women's Federation.  
Source: Wshed.blog.sohu.com





## LEADING SEX AND GENDER STORIES OF 2012

Since 2008, the Sex and Gender Institute at Beijing Forestry University (Beijing Linye daxue xing yu xingbie yanjiusuo 北京林业大学性与性别研究所) has published an annual list of the Ten Biggest Sex and Gender Stories in China (Niandu shi da xing yu xingbie shijian 年度十大性与性别事件). The following is a translation of the 2012 list:

### Thirty-eight-year-old Master's Degree Holder Promotes Chastity

In February 2012, Tu Shiyou from Wuhan University started a blog advocating premarital chastity and proclaimed that she herself was still a virgin (and she uploaded a medical report to her blog to prove it). This elicited many critical and satirical responses from online commentators.

### Ye Haiyan and Free Sexual Services

At the beginning of the year, Ye Haiyan — a well-known advocate for the rights of sex workers and AIDS victims — posted pictures on her Weibo account



Ye Haiyan.  
Source: Baidu Baike

of herself, volunteering to provide free sexual services to migrant workers to focus attention on the lack of legal rights for sex workers. In response, Ye was subjected to physical abuse by locals and her place of work was attacked.

In May 2013, Ye was in the news again for mounting a protest in Hainan against the sexual abuse of schoolgirls there by their principal by uploading photos of herself carrying a sign that said: ‘School principal — leave the schoolgirls alone and come to my room!’ Again, she was the victim of physical attack.

### ‘Gendered’ Education

In February, Zhengzhou No.18 Middle School in Henan province tested a new education method when it announced the introduction of different academic standards for ‘Masculine Boys’ and ‘Refined and Intelligent Girls’. In March, the Shanghai municipal government approved No.8 Middle School’s ‘Shanghai Senior High School Experimental Class for Boys’ with the stated goal of creating a happy environment for the cultivation of wholesome and studious male learners. Both schools reported good results in their experiments.

### Under-aged Girls in Brothels

In 1997, the Criminal Law was revised so that keeping under-aged girls in brothels was specified as a crime separate from the crime of statutory rape. Various scholars have in the period since maintained that this distinction lowers the threat of punishment for criminals who keep under-age girls in brothels. In March 2012, the Vice-Chairperson of the All-China Women’s Federation (*Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui* 中华全国妇女联合会), Zhen Yan, stated that the law does not adequately protect minors, and called for the law to be repealed.

### Suicide of a Gay Man’s Wife

In June, a woman named Hong Lingcong jumped to her death from a building after her husband admitted to her on Weibo that he was gay. This case ignited heated debate within the gay community regarding marriage: many gay men and lesbian women end up in a loveless heterosexual marriage in order to please their families.

### ‘I May be Flirtatious, but You Shouldn’t Harass Me’



A female protester holding a placard reading ‘I may be flirtatious, but you shouldn’t harass me’.  
Source: Sohu.com

In June, an official working on the Shanghai subway posted an image on Weibo showing the back of a woman wearing a see-through top. Professing his good intentions, the official reminded women not to invite sexual harassment by dressing provocatively. A few days later, two women launched a protest by carrying posters in the subway with the words ‘I may be flirtatious, but you shouldn’t harass me’ (*Wo keyi sao, ni buneng rao* 我可以骚，你不能扰), saying that they had the right to dress in revealing clothes without the threat of being harassed or abused on the subway or, for that matter, anywhere else.

### Eighty-four-year-old Transgender Woman Steps Out of the Closet

In June, an eighty four-year-old transgender woman in Guangdong province named Qian Jinfan stepped into the limelight by accepting an invitation to be interviewed by a journalist. Qian intended to challenge the prejudices held in society against the transgendered. She has not had a sex change operation but dresses and self-identifies as a woman.

### The Fight Against Sexual Violence

During a ‘Global Campaign Against Sexual Violence Towards Women’ in November and December 2012, the UN Population Fund’s representative office in China ran a concurrent online campaign urging men to pledge to oppose sexual violence against women. During the sixteen-day campaign, 351 men signed up to the pledge.

### Online ‘Pornographic Anti-corruption’ Cases

During 2012, pornographic images and videos of officials were regularly exposed online, and punishment meted out to the people involved. Such cases have seen an official at a university expelled from the Party in August, another

er official at a university fired from his position in November and, that same month, an official in Chongqing was relieved of his position.

### Activities of Feminists

2012 was a year of increased feminist protests in China. These included:

- In February, a number of women launched ‘Occupy Male Restrooms’
- In April, female students at Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou sent a letter to 500 companies protesting against gender discrimination in recruitment
- In August, women shaved their heads to express their dissatisfaction with the Ministry of Education over gender discrimination in college entrance exams
- In November, women posted bare-breasted pictures of themselves online to show their support for the enactment of laws governing domestic violence
- In December, women in Guangzhou put on red wedding dresses to protest against domestic violence.



Women shave their heads to protest gender biased examination policy.  
Source: Chinese Internet Forum



Women protesters outside a men's restroom.  
Source: Mop.com



## MARRIAGE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Rachel Wang

*The following is adapted with permission from an article that originally appeared on TeaLeafNation.com.*

IN LATE February 2013, the Sina Weibo news portal published an article that included the following assertion:

According to relevant regulations, the first marriage of males aged twenty-five or older and females aged twenty-three or older are considered 'late marriages'. A bit of simple math shows that 2013 is the first year that some post-Eighties [those born in 1980 or later] are turning thirty-three, and the first year that some post-Nineties [those born in 1990 or later] are of 'late marriage' age.

Over 400,000 web users discussed the topic on Sina Weibo, and with print media covering it as well, the subject of 'late marriage' generated a discussion on a variety of issues related to marriage, age and gender roles in China: how can a Chinese woman born in 1990 already be too old for marriage?

Though the age for late marriage was not set in the law, twenty-three years of age for women and twenty-five years for men has been the assumed standard at local levels, and has been used in such documents as the Population and Family Planning Policy of Beijing (Chapter 3, Article 16), published in 2003. Several decades ago, the state ac-



tually encouraged late marriage. Chapter 2, Article 6 of the 1980 Marriage Law states: 'Late marriage and late child-birth should be encouraged.'

Although the original aim of the Population and Family Planning Policy was to curb population growth, policy-makers today have different concerns. A number of prominent Chinese academics recently signed a letter pointing out that even if China's one-child policy were to be scrapped immediately, the Chinese population will begin to shrink in ten years. Faced with an aging population, China has an interest in hurrying its post-Nineties citizens into marriage.

Yet some young Chinese women still hesitate. Some of their reasons are similar to those of other women around the world who are less keen than those of previous generations to jump into marriage early (or in some cases, at all). Ifeng.com surveyed over 35,500 single women in China in early 2013. The most popular response to the question 'What kind of men are you willing to marry?' was 'a divorced man who owns a house and car' followed by 'a successful forty-something man who has gone on a lot of blind dates but is still single'. The least popular kind of man, com-

ing behind even 'an unassuming computer programmer' and 'a handsome freelancer', was the so-called 'phoenix man' (*fenghuang nan* 凤凰男), a successful and ambitious businessman or corporate executive from a humble background. 'Phoenix men' are assumed to have exhausted the resources of their families in the process of educating themselves and raising themselves out of poverty, and are expected to have many family members burden them financially and emotionally. Instead of being regarded as heroes who changed their own destinies, 'phoenix men' are perceived to be prone to insecurity, fear of failure, penny pinching, inferiority complexes, and prioritisation of their extended family over their own wife and children.

One female Weibo user commented on the popularity of the 'divorced man with a house and a car':

I personally think that you may lose face by marrying an old man, but at least you might have some security in life. He might also be less flirtatious. A more stable life would bring you a sense of safety.



Street scene in Zhuzhou, Hunan province.  
Photo: Ernie Emop

A majority of the women surveyed said that while single, they devote themselves to their work. Almost half reported they had no sex life. A sizable 13.28 percent said they did not want to marry, while 23.87 percent said they were 'uncertain, tired, and might never love again'. Paradoxically, as pressure from

the state and society to marry early increases, women might opt out altogether from a system that seems designed to entrap them in a loveless economic relationship or a love match that makes no economic sense.

