

Single women being singled out: the *sheng nü* (“leftover women”) phenomenon in China

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取り残された独身女性
— 中国における「剩女」現象 —

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Abstract

The *sheng nü* (“leftover women”) phenomenon in contemporary China has attracted both public attention and academic research, while the term itself is ambiguous. *Sheng nü* are pre-categorized based on not their unmarried status but their failure to find a boyfriend. Based on interviews and participant observations, this article focuses on the mate-searching process and points out that *sheng nü* mainly rely on arranged dates to meet potential partners. While this reliance restricts their freedom and choices, they themselves might welcome it to some extent, which reflects the contradiction in their individualization.

Keywords : *sheng nü* (“leftover women”), mate-searching process, gender norms, individualization

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1. Introduction

Marriage has long been and remains an important social institution in Chinese society. Historically, marriage was utilitarian, aiming to have children and extend the 'descent line' (Pimentel, 2000). Women's status was low and they became part of the husband's household after marriage. During the 20th century, marriage in China has changed greatly. Especially from the 1950s, the socialist government started to promote marriage freedom and gender equality (Wang et al. 2013). There has been a dramatic shift from arranged marriage to greater freedom in mate choice (Xu and Whyte 1990). Meanwhile, marriage remains universal in contemporary China. Less than 5% of people in the age range of 35 to 39 are unmarried for both genders (National Bureau of Statistics 2012). Besides, marriage is significant for women who are expected to comply with their gender role as primary family caregivers (Nakano 2015). Parents also expect and even pressure their daughters to get married at a proper age, which they deem are crucial for the daughters' happiness (To, 2015).

However, late marriage is an increasingly common practice. The mean age at first marriage increased from 21.4 in 1990 to 25.7 in 2017 (National Bureau of Statistics 2018). This tendency is more prominent in urban areas. For example, the average age at first marriage of men and women in Shanghai was 30.3 and 28.4 respectively in 2015 (Peng 2018). Meanwhile, the proportion of single women rose, with the number of unmarried women in different age ranges increasing remarkably. The proportion of unmarried women in the age range from 25 to 29 has increased quickly from 8.7% in 2005 to 21.6% in 2012 (UN 2012).

Despite that marriage is postponed for both men and women, contemporary Chinese society seems to lack a positive or even neutral term for single females. The increasing number of unmarried women has attracted wide attention in the public discourse, resulting the generation of the term *sheng nü*. "*Sheng*" (剩) means "leftover" in Chinese. It refers to surplus, which at times can be positive, but generally is used in a degrading manner with connotations similar to that of "leftover" in English. Given the term's connotation, being referred to as "leftover women" indicates that these single women are unwanted.

This prevalent, as well as discriminatory label, and the late marriage phenomenon that underlies it, has not only attracted public attention but also academic concerns. Though a relatively new phenomenon, several existing studies have covered various aspects related to the *sheng nü* phenomenon. Wang and Abbott focus on *sheng nü*'s daily life and expectations to explore what being single means to single educated women in Beijing and Guangzhou (2013). Fincher studies the image of *sheng nü* constructed by the mass media, and argues that it partly reflected the resurgence of gender inequality in China (Fincher 2014). Based on a series of interviews in Shanghai, To points out that the gendered constraints imposed by *sheng nü*'s romantic partners was the largest contributing factor that causes women being "leftover" (2013). In Gaetano's study, *sheng nü* in

Beijing, Shanghai and Sweden contest normative gender by crafting new identities as independent women and promoting egalitarian gender relations in marriage (2014). Ji argues that *sheng nü* respond to constraints strategically and realize a balance between traditional attitudes towards marriage and modern life (Ji 2015).

Despite the widespread use of the term, it is unclear what kind of women is labeled as *sheng nü*. While the extant literature has addressed the topic of *sheng nü* as a problem, and share a few common standards to find informants such as age range, researchers tend to indirectly deal with what the term *sheng nü* indicates and few studies have given a clear analysis of what kind of women is *sheng nü* and how this categorization makes sense. In this article, I do not intend to establish a definition of the term, but to emphasize how singlehood is closely connected to the label and how women are discriminated against firstly not because of their unmarried status but their failure to find a boyfriend. This argument is of importance for my further analysis of the mate-searching process.

The mate-searching process is one aspect that has not been paid enough attention in previous research. In fact, mate selection includes not only a decision making process in which a couple decides whether to marry each other or not, but also a searching process in which people get to meet their potential partners (Tsutsui 2013). Emphasis on the decision making process in extant research often misses the fact that *sheng nü*, who are single and without a boyfriend, have not reached the stage at which any marital decision could be made.

Without paying attention to the mate-searching process, we might preconceive a problematic dichotomous framework of love marriage versus arranged marriage. Tsutsui (2013) argues that a considerable number of marriages in East Asian countries cannot be described as either arranged marriage or individual-chosen love marriage, but should be considered in the transitional phase. By separating mate selection into searching process and decision making process, Tsutsui confirms one transitional type of mate selection in which the searching process is initiated by parents, kin, or matchmakers, but the decision to marry is autonomous. In this article, I draw on Tsutsui's reconceptualization of mate selection to emphasize *sheng nü*'s limbo in mate-searching process.

The individualization thesis provides an insightful perspective to examine the *sheng nü* phenomenon. Drawing on the idea of continuum of individualization (Smart and Shipman 2004), To (2015) analyzes how women cope with their filial duty and realize a balance between deference and negotiation. On one end of the continuum are the "most individualized" women who show a high degree of individual reflexivity and negotiate with parents about their partner choices, while on the other end of the continuum are the "least individualized" women who completely defer to parents' partner decision. For young people in Beijing, individualization is an ambition as well as a lived

reality. Although unchained from institutional arrangements, their choices of romantic partners sometimes serve to realize their desire to attain social status which represents their re-embedding and conformity (Wang and Nehring 2014). Both studies noted the uniqueness of the Chinese society which is “undergoing a process of individualization on a uniquely Chinese path” (Yan 2010, pp.35). Yan’s arguments shed light on our understanding of *sheng nü*’s limited independence and autonomy in marriage formation. Similarly, Chang and Song suggest that under compressed modernity, individualization without individualism particularly among women is a region-wide phenomenon in East Asia (2010).

In this paper, I emphasize the importance of singlehood in the use of this term, and argue that single women are pre-categorized based on their failure to find a boyfriend. Then I focus on the arranged dates in their mate-searching process. While *sheng nü* remain in this ineffective process for years and mainly rely on arranged dates to meet potential partners, they might in fact welcome this efficient mechanism which only provides them with qualified candidates. The reliance reflects the contradiction in their individualization process.

2. Methods and data

I chose Jinan City as the site of my investigation. Jinan is the capital of Shandong province - a prosperous province on China’s east coast. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method I employed in this research. I used snowball sampling to find informants. Firstly, I asked my friends and relatives in Jinan to introduce potential informants, and then I asked women in my interviews to recommend more interview candidates. In total, I recruited 13 interviewees. The age range of my interviewees is from 25 to 34, with an average age of 29.2. Among all my 13 informants, four of them have PhD degrees, six of them have master degrees and three have bachelor degrees. I interviewed them in 2014 for the first time and 11 of these informants in 2016 for the second time. As I found that my informants mainly relied on arranged dates to meet potential partners, in my interviews in 2016, I focused on this theme to organize my interviews and collect data. I kept in touch with most of my informants (11 in 13) from 2014 to 2017 using Wechat to know their recent status. It helped me greatly to know their mate-searching process, including how the arranged dates are organized and how they feel about these dates. Furthermore, I also conducted observations at a public match-making event in Jinan in 2017.

Compared to previous studies, the data I collected has two main differences. Firstly, most existing studies about *sheng nü* phenomenon select Beijing and Shanghai as the investigation site (To 2013; Gaetano 2014; To 2015; Ji 2015; Fincher 2016; Wang and Abbott 2013). Similar phenomena in less urban areas like Jinan have barely been investigated. Although Jinan also attracts a lot of migrants, most of them are residents of Shandong province. It is in marked contrast with Beijing and Shanghai, where migrants from all parts of the country make up a large percentage of the urban

population. This point is of importance for my research, as the short distance within the same province makes it possible for parents to impose more of an influence on my informants, including arranging blind dates. Secondly, none of my informants have ever worked or studied overseas. Nevertheless, in some existing studies, overseas experience is commonly shared by many interviewees. In To's (2013) and Ji's (2015) research about half and one third of informants have worked or studied overseas respectively, and all Gaetano's informants had traveled internationally and several had lived abroad (2015).

3. Who are *sheng nü*?

There is a vagueness surrounding the use of this term in both mass media and academic research. When I started my research, I, too, did not have clear ideas about which kinds of women are labelled with this derogatory term. As my interviews went on, one simple but often neglected fact gradually became clear - if a woman has a boyfriend, then she is not a *sheng nü* anymore. None of my informants think woman in a romantic relationship, no matter how trivial it is and regardless of whether this relationship will lead to marriage or not, can be called *sheng nü*. While they had disparate views regarding whether a girl aged 25 without a boyfriend could be called a *sheng nü*, there is an agreement that this hypothetical 25-year-old girl is definitely not a *sheng nü* if she is in a relationship. What is equally noteworthy is that once the relationship is over then she might become a *sheng nü* again, and once a *sheng nü* finds a boyfriend, she can get rid of this labelling instantly - this transition of identity can be repeated over and over again.

This categorization has received little attention in previous studies. Researchers tend to start their investigation with the default perception that *sheng nü* are unmarried women over a certain age. Thus, they do not point out the fact that only an unmarried woman without a boyfriend count as *sheng nü*. Previous research has documented how *sheng nü* are pressured by their parents to hasten their marriage formation. But for *sheng nü*, their priority is to find a boyfriend which then might lead to marriage, which suggests the importance of the mate-searching process. This missing piece is not explicitly mentioned in existing studies.

Moreover, when considering it in a broader context, this finding suggests the uniqueness of *sheng nü* phenomenon in China. In fact, the stigmatization of unmarried women is not new in different cultures and societies. In Europe, spinster and "old maid" (Linn 1996: 70) refer to women who never married. In Japan, *makeinu* (the loser dog) is a term which refers to single childless women in their 30s (Yamaguchi 2006). Despite the cross-cultural prevalence of the stigmatization of single women and China's late marriage trend, it seems that Chinese society categorizes women not only based on their marriage status - women, far before they are married, are pre-judged and pre-categorized as being "left over", based on whether they have boyfriend or not. Once a woman can "luckily" become someone's girlfriend, despite her unmarried status, she is not "left over" any

more. *Sheng nü*, as this term literally indicates, are women “left over”. The omitted subject of the predicate “*sheng*” (left over) are males – the other indispensable part in a romantic relationship.

As marriage formation has been late regardless of gender, it is natural to ask: is there “*sheng nan*” (leftover men)? The answer is yes. But this term is not closely related to well-educated single males and it attracts much less public attention or academic research. In fact, there are many more unmarried males than females. Due to the sex-selective abortion from the 1980s, the natural sex ratio at birth has been significantly skewed, which then inevitably causes an imbalance in the sex ratio (Huang, 2014). It was estimated that in 2015, the proportions of males in the marriage market was 11.4% higher than females (Huang, 2014). This serious marriage squeeze is supposed to favor single women, however, “*sheng nü*” seem to gain little advantage. The gender norms exert much more pressure on women rather than men to get married soon. While men could wait in the marriage market, women who also stay single are clearly and discriminatorily labelled. Thus, unmarried men, though faced with a serious marriage squeeze, are less attractive to public attention and less vulnerable to discriminations.

4. Limbo during the mate-searching process

As the discriminatory labelling *sheng nü* is mainly determined by whether a woman is in a relationship or not, then finding a boyfriend is a straightforward as well as the only solution to get out of this plight. Except one, all my unmarried informants expressed that they wanted to find a boyfriend soon. Thus, I expected to hear that my informants employed various mate selecting methods to find their ideal partners. However, when asked what their main ways to meet potential partners are, Liu’s response is interesting:

My family arrange some “xiang qin” (arranged dates) for me...And my colleagues voluntarily asked me if I am single, and then they will ask me if I want to see someone. ... I also ask my friends to keep their eyes open if they can find a decent guy to introduce to me. (Liu, 34, college teacher)

Her response is representative of all my informants’ situations: though they claim that they want to get married soon, no other actions except participating in the dates arranged by parents, relatives, friends and colleagues have been taken. In practice, arranged dates are their main way to meet potential partners.

On average, more than 85% of the potential partners they met from 2014 to 2016 were introduced by others through arranged dates. For four of my informants, they only met with potential partners via these arranged blind dates. This finding is also partly reflected in To’s research. Among all her 14 informants, she discussed 6 informants’ mate-searching process, and all these 6 informants had the experience of participating in dates arranged by their parents or friends (2015). Given that her research site, Shanghai, is the most international city in China, and my investigation site Jinan, is a medium-size provincial capital, we may speculate that my finding of the dominance of arranged

dates in the searching process is not accidental or just a mere regional practice.

This reliance on arranged dates leads me to put more attention on one process that has largely been ignored in previous research - the mate-searching process, which is indispensable to understand the *sheng nü* phenomenon. Firstly, *sheng nü* remain at the searching process for years. They have spent years participating in all kinds of dates arranged by others with little experience in romantic relationships. At the average age of 29.2 when I interviewed them for the first time, five of them had never been in a romantic relationship at all, and only one informant had more than two ex-boyfriends before. When I interviewed them for the second time in 2016, only three of them experienced a short relationship in the past two years. Most of them thought that their romantic experiences are too few. One informant Li said: "To tell you the truth, I do not even know how to deal with a romantic relationship!"

Secondly, it is the lengthiness of this searching process and the arranged dates that causes them great pressure and anxiety. Previous studies all noted *sheng nü* have conflicts with their parents on marriage timing and different mate selection criteria in the decision making process. But for my informants all of whom do not have a boyfriend, their decision-making process is, at most, to decide whether they would like to see a man again whom they met from arranged dates. It is the dates imposed by their parents that cause most conflicts between *sheng nü* and their parents. As all my informants' natal families live in Shandong, the short distance within the same province makes it possible for the parents to search potential partners through their social network and then arrange dates regardless of their daughter's feeling. This kind of unsolicited help from parents might not be convenient for parents of *sheng nü* in Beijing and Shanghai. Although To (2015) also documents a few of her informants went on dates introduced by their parents, this practice is not as common as among my informants who mainly rely on arranged dates.

Can has more experience in participating in arranged dates than other informants. She once spent a weekend in which she had to meet 4 men in 3 different places. She told me: "I became numb that weekend. But it was like homework I have to finish. My mom called me and asked about the dates. I could not even remember who was who!" More than half of Can's dates were arranged by her family who live in a small town in Shandong. Can told me that she admitted this 'homework' was for her good but sometimes she was really bored with it. "I also want to refuse some dates. I am quite busy...but then my parents will be more anxious. They use all their connections to find proper men for me. I've already made them disappointed." She said.

The short distance between *sheng nü* and their natal family not only makes it possible for parents to arrange dates but also easier to have more impact on the dates. These parents got married in the 1970 and 1980s when marriage was still strongly influenced by their own parents and dating culture

was not common at that time (Xu and Whyte 1990). Romantic love, which is deemed crucial for a relationship to my informants, is not always a factor parents think as indispensable to constitute a good couple. After coming back from an arranged date set up by her aunt, Lin said that she did not like the man and would not see him again. Lin's mother persuaded her to have a second date with the man and to get to know more about each other, which seemed ridiculous and unacceptable for Lin. The persuasion gradually escalated into an argument and finally her mother shouted at her: "How much 'liking' do you need to see him again?!"

But it turned out that this was just the beginning of the conflict. Lin's mother lived in Zibo – a medium size city about 45 minutes from Jinan by train. She visits her only daughter Lin every month after her retirement, lives with Lin for a few days and makes some good meals, and then goes back to Zibo. But this time, she decided to take more actions to "help" her daughter. She discussed Lin's issue with Lin's aunt and contacted the mother of the man. They had good conversations on the phone and agreed to persuade their own child to meet again respectively. "When I found out their scheme I was furious. How can she contact her (the man's mother) without my permission? That is too awkward. It is like that I am very pathetic and cannot get married." After a big quarrel, Lin's mother went back to Zibo and did not talk to Lin for one whole month.

As meeting an ideal partner is not an easy thing, they stay in this stage for years. However, this staying does not mean they have a lot of dates and can meet a great number of potential partners. On average, my informants had 29 arranged dates in 2014 and 24 arranged dates in 2015. Even Can, did not have more than one arranged date per week in the past one year when I interviewed her. When I told her that it means she does not have more than 52 dates per year, she seemed quite surprised: "Ah! If I want to get married before 35...50 per year...then I have to select from 200 men!"

As they come to find that the dates arranged by others have not brought them a good relationship as the years go by, I speculated they might have their own actions or methods to meet potential partners. A considerable body of research has found that in modern China, young people gradually dominate their own mate selection process while parents are losing their control to a great extent (Wang and Petula 2007; Yan 2011). All my informants have full-time jobs and were financially independent. None reside with their natal family and six of them had bought their own apartment. Thus, greater autonomy in mate selection, which includes both decision making and mate-searching, is supposed to be more evident in my interviews.

During my interviews, I listed some possible ways to meet potential partners to discuss, hoping to find their preferred strategies, but their answers basically negated the possibility to choose anyone from my list: when asked if they would initiate dropping hints at a party to a man they find attractive, they tended to think that it is not wise to be so proactive because they are of the idea that if a man

likes a girl then he would actively court her. When asked if they are willing to meet a man they know through an online social network tool, most of them think that it is not safe for women. When asked if they would join in public matchmaking events, seven informants feel that would be like “shopping” and they were not interested. So, their refusal to diversify their methods put them back to relying upon arranged dates which have not shown any semblance of efficiency or effectiveness.

5. Arranged dates: ineffective but efficient

One important feature of the arranged date is that the potential partners *sheng nü* meet on arranged dates are ones who have been chosen by other people. Before they meet one man on an arranged date, maybe more potential partners have been excluded by the introducers. In other words, the searching process will determine who will be involved in the deciding process to a large extent. As it is impossible for the middleman to measure or predict how *sheng nü* will perceive the date partner, these dates often disappointed my informants, who all desire romantic love.

This desire is clearly shown in my interviews. When asked about what they seek in a romantic partner, most of my informants mentioned “*you ganjue*” (to have feelings) or other similar phrases as the most important criteria, which means someone who evokes within them romantic feelings and affection. But when I asked them to give more specific standards, many of my informants thought it hard to answer. One frequently mentioned response was “*you gangjue jiushi you ganjue*”, which simply means if you have that feeling, then you have it and vice versa.

But for them, the arranged dates in and of itself is not romantic enough. Li explained to me: “When two people meet each other with a clear purpose, it is not romantic. I don’t mean it is impossible. But how can you fall in love when two people are prepared to make judgment?” So, neither the nature of arranged dates nor the men who did not evoke their romantic feelings could satisfy *sheng nü*’s expectations.

The emphasis on romantic feelings does not mean they have no other criteria. By asking more concrete interview questions, I discovered four very clear requirements that most of my informants think are indispensable. The first one is a bachelor’s degree and the second one is a decent job. All my informants think that having a college education is a necessity, otherwise, they will not share a ‘common language’ with their partner. The third one is “*men dang hu dui*”, which means two people should share compatible family backgrounds especially in terms of the family’s social status. While the first three standards have been documented in previous research (Ji 2015; To 2015), the fourth one about the age range for potential partners has not received much attention. While all of them think they can accept a man ten years older than them, only one of them thinks that a man who is more than three years younger is acceptable.

What is noteworthy is that such detailed criteria do not need to be communicated explicitly between my informants and the introducers. For example, when I asked “If your friend wants to introduce you to a guy who is four years younger than you, then you will refuse to meet him, right?”, they replied that their friends would not do that because they all knew men who are too young would not be appropriate. Here, it seems that there is a tacit understanding about the appropriate age range. Similar tacit understandings exist regarding other criteria like educational level and family background.

Since it is impossible for the middleman to gauge the “*gan jue*” (romantic feeling) that *sheng nü* may have (and in many cases, the middleman does not care about it that much), they can only choose males according to certain criteria based on which the middleman assumes make a man suitable. Moreover, it turns out that these potential partners who can pass “the first screening” all have college education, decent jobs, and accord with the age range on which introducers and *sheng nü* have certain tacit understandings of. This of course results in *sheng nü* only meeting “proper” candidates who conform to their requirements.

Then, the current routine, in some sense, may be welcomed by *sheng nü* with or without their consciousness. Although their reliance on other people’s help to search for potential partners does not prove to be fruitful, from *sheng nü*’s standpoint the current searching mechanism in fact is very efficient and comes “quality assured”. The “first screening” is accomplished by other people without them needing to make any effort. Only through this mechanism which so far seems far from successful, can it be guaranteed that every male they meet in arranged dates conforms to their requirements. Such mate-searching methods ensures the “quality” of the potential partner and could be regarded as efficient to some extent.

My participant observation in a public match-making event in Jinan could be seen as another example of *sheng nü*’s reliance on the other people’s help in mate-searching and how arranged dates are efficient in searching “qualified” potential partners. This kind of event is usually held by the local newspaper, local government, and matchmaking websites. According to newspaper reports, in 2014 alone, 10 events were held in Jinan, with more than one thousand people participating in each event. After paying 90 RMB for registration and submitting my own profile information such as age, picture, and annual income, etc., I received a ticket to join the “Spring” matchmaking event which lasted from April 1st to the 4th in 2017. This event is the most famous one in Jinan which attracted thousands of participants each time. When I got there on April 2nd, many boards have been set up with participants’ profile papers stuck onto them. Although similar scenes had been reported before in the media, it still surprised me when I noticed upon my first glance that there were so many parents hanging around the boards, chatting with each other. Many parents stood in front of the boards and took pictures of the profiles that looked “proper” to them. Wang, the mother of a

28-year-old daughter, told me that she submitted a profile on behalf of her daughter and has received several contacts which she would pass on to her daughter. When I asked why her daughter did not come by herself, she said:

She went to Hangzhou to have fun with her friends there...She does not want to come...We parents can do nothing. We can not decide for them. We do what we can... My daughter is good-looking, but I do not know what kind of looks are good-looking to her. I hope she can be satisfied with someone I choose for her. Young people are too picky now. (Wang, 61)

As my profile including my phone number was available to other participants, in a week after the event I received 6 calls and 2 short messages from eight different people. Except for one that was sent by a young woman who was also a participant of the event, all the others came from parents and even an aunt, trying to obtain more information about me and in an attempt to arrange a date for their daughters. As I mentioned before, more than half of my informants said they did not want to join this kind of event which they felt was like shopping. But it seems that there are other people such as their parents doing the “shopping” for them with a vaguely formed shopping list and a large cart filled with potential goods waiting for *sheng nü*'s second screening – arranged dates.

So arranged dates, either introduced by their family and social network, or through public match-making event, demonstrate efficiency regarding finding potential partners who conform to *sheng nü*'s requirements. This efficiency explains an apparent difference between To's study (2015) and mine. While she documents that a few of her informants have to defer to their parents' demand and go to some arranged dates as a filial strategy, most of my informants expressed not much resistance to participate in arranged dates.

6. Conclusion

It is the sheer fact of their singlehood – no husband or boyfriend – that causes *sheng nü* to be indiscriminately devalued and categorized as if they constitute a homogeneous group. From a larger picture, we can see a remarkable incompatibility between China's social development and its gender norms. On one hand, educational and labor opportunities have been much more widespread especially with millions of Chinese women benefiting from the unprecedented popularization of college education in the past 30 years. But meanwhile, gender norms have not changed correspondingly. Centering on their singlehood, women are pre-categorized into a group with a discriminatory label and pressured to hasten their marriage. The categorization and devaluation centering on singlehood reflects that for Chinese women, marriage is more than an obligation they are requested to fulfill, and being single is not a normal or an acceptable phase before entering into marriage. Conjugal relationships, even unwed ones, are a crucial center around which Chinese women construct their sense of social reality in everyday life.

The mate-searching process is important to understand *sheng nü*. It is not the decision-making

process but their limbo during the mate-searching process without a boyfriend that causes them greater pressure and to be discriminated. They desire for a romantic relationship and have the freedom to make marital choices, which suggest some attributes of love marriage. But meanwhile, they seldom take initiative in mate-searching but mainly rely on arranged dates to meet potential partners. This reliance restricts their choices and only brings them potential partners who have been selected by the introducers. As an indispensable part of marriage formation, the mate-searching process suggests that their autonomy is limited and they are still in the shift from arranged marriage to love marriage. They are “both traditional and modern at the same time (Ji 2015, p.1071)”, insisting on their own free choice while employing a traditional way to search potential partners.

Sheng nü could be better understood by situating them in the individualization process. Given their high educational level and full-time job, it seems that *sheng nü* might have realized independence and autonomy to a certain degree. This lays the realistic foundation for their disembedding from family and other encompassing categories, which is a main feature of the individualization process. However, their reliance on arranged dates leads me to question the extent to which they have obtained actual independence and autonomy and whether they have disembedded from their natal family. Even if they have the freedom to make marital choices, such choices are confined as to whether they would like to see the man again who they met first in the arranged date. Remaining single is not a single choice but might be based on “a series of decisions to reject ‘inappropriate’ matches (Nakano 2015, pp175)” while they engage themselves in their pursuit of self-fulfillment. However, their freedom of rejection is partly conditional on their reliance on arranged dates which provide them with options to reject. In the continuum of individualization (To 2015), their reliance intertwined with their autonomy situates them somewhere in-between.

It is important to see the family’s role in *sheng nü*’s mate-searching and in their individualization. While parents have conflicts with *sheng nü* over marriage timing which has been documented in previous research in details, they also provide unsolicited and sometime even excessive help to search for potential candidates without the *sheng nü*’s resistance. Especially in my research, the short distance within the same province makes it possible for parents and relatives to arrange blind dates. “*As the individual disembeds from encompassing social categories, neither tradition nor the collective has to disappear; instead, both can be used as a resource by the rising individual* (Yan 2009, pp.21)”. Thus, it remains a question if their reliance on family hinders *sheng nü* from disembedding from family, or family as a resource could escort them through a unique individualization path.

Individualization calls for the enterprising self (Yan 2010). The process imposes increasing responsibility on individuals, and demands individuals to become proactive and self-determining (Beck and Beck-Gersheim 2002). Women in Beijing and Shanghai in previous research contest

normative gender and negotiate various constraints by employing various strategies (Gaetano 2014, Ji 2015, To 2013). In contrast, women in less urban Jinan in my study do not take many active actions in the mate-searching process. While arranged dates as a mate-searching method is ineffective and seems boring to them, considering their own mate selection criteria and little romantic experience, arranged dates function as a safe and efficient way to search and screen for proper candidates which requires almost no effort on their part, and thus is welcomed by *sheng nü*. As they have yet to “rise as a truly autonomous, independent and self-directing agent (Yan 2010, pp.32)” to resolve practical and existential dilemmas, *sheng nü* might restrict themselves in the pursuit of marriage and in their individualization process. In this sense, the normative contours of contemporary Chinese society in terms of prevailing gender norms, are constructed not only by the anxious parents, but also single women themselves, who are in “*individualization without individualism* (Chang and Song 2010, pp558)”.

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