



# China's 'leftover women' choosing to stay single

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Two women walk with shopping bags in Beijing, China, on April 23.

**Editor's note:** Leta Hong Fincher, featured on this month's episode of "On China," is a scholar on Chinese women issues at Tsinghua University. The names of interviewees in this article have been changed to protect their privacy. [See here for show times.](#)

**Beijing (CNN)** -- After years of being badgered by her parents to get married, 26-year-old Zhang Yu finally had enough.

"I have decided never to marry or have a child," said Zhang, a university graduate from Changsha, Hunan province, who moved to Shanghai earlier this year to escape her family and jumpstart her career.

Zhang's vow to never marry is rare in a country where educated women are constantly told by their families, friends and the state media that they will be lonely and miserable if they do not find a husband quickly.

Yet some women are fighting back by rejecting marriage altogether.

Zhang had been living with her parents in Hunan to save money after obtaining her college degree, and for a time, fell sway to her parents' worries that she would become a "leftover woman" (or "shengnv" in Chinese,) officially defined as an urban, educated woman over age 27 who is single.

But upon reading feminist websites, she came to believe the term existed to make women return to the home.

She then took a risk by moving to Shanghai without a job and leaving the comforts of home for a dorm room shared with nine other roommates. But she loves her new friends and sense of freedom.

"Men are still thinking in the old ways, but women's values have evolved. I feel very relaxed now," said Zhang, who just received a sales job offer.

Lan Fang, a 32-year-old client relations manager for a financial company in Shanghai, similarly embraces her single lifestyle. She enjoys a relatively high income of 20,000 RMB a month (around US\$3,200) and often goes out with friends to dinners, movies and concerts. "Where I grew up in Nanjing, I saw so many couples getting into big fights, and most of them seemed unhappy. Plus, so many men have affairs," Lan said. "My life in Shanghai now is very rich, why would I want to change it?"

Zhang and Lan are in the minority, but their attitudes reflect the reality that marriage in today's China does little to protect women's rights.

### **Domestic abuse**

For example, a Chinese woman has almost no recourse if her husband abuses her. Official statistics show that a quarter of women have experienced intimate partner violence, but feminist activists say that number is an underestimate.

Li Ying, an attorney and director of the Yuanzhong Gender Development Center in Beijing, said many women do not recognize they are victims of domestic violence.

"Ask a woman if she has experienced domestic violence and she will say, 'Oh no, of course not!'" Li said. "Ask her if her husband has hit her and she will say yes."

Despite years of intense lobbying by women's rights groups, the Chinese government has failed to enact targeted legislation to curb domestic violence.

"Judges almost never define a case as 'domestic violence' because the current law in China is not specific or clear enough," said Feng Yuan, a leading activist with the Anti-Domestic Violence Network in Beijing. As a result, it is extremely difficult for women to secure protection from a violent partner.

### **'The most rational choice is to stay single'**

Married women also experienced a severe setback to their property rights in 2011, when the Supreme People's Court amended China's Marriage Law to state, essentially, that marital property belongs to the person whose name is on the home deed. In China, that person is usually the husband.

## **My life in Shanghai now is very rich, why would I want to change it?**

### **Lan Fang**

According to a 2012 survey by Horizon China of home buying in the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, only 30% of marital home deeds include the woman's name, even though over 70% of women contribute to the marital home purchase.

This is just one of the ways in which Chinese women have been shut out of arguably the largest accumulation of residential property wealth in history, valued at 3.3 times China's GDP, according to figures from HSBC. That amounted to more than \$28 trillion at the end of 2012.

Defenders of the court ruling on marriage argue that women are entitled to compensation for their share of the home payments, but most women do not keep receipts of their contributions. And stay-at-home mothers have even less financial protection in the event of a divorce.

Many women are upset about the change in the Marriage Law, but the authoritarian nature of China's one-party state has prevented a women's rights movement from gaining traction.

"The institution of marriage basically benefits men, and when women are hurt, this institution doesn't protect our rights," a young woman in Beijing recently told me. "The most rational choice is to stay single."