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Population & Societies

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Being a single man in rural China

Isabelle Attané* and the DefiChine research team**

Many men in China have no choice but to remain single – a preoccupying situation, as this mass of unmarried men is perceived there as a threat to the social order. Drawing on data from the DefiChine survey, Isabelle Attané and her colleagues examine the factors of male singlehood in rural China and call into question a number of common assumptions held there, including the idea that men who cannot get married are more inclined to engage in high-risk or socially disapproved practices.

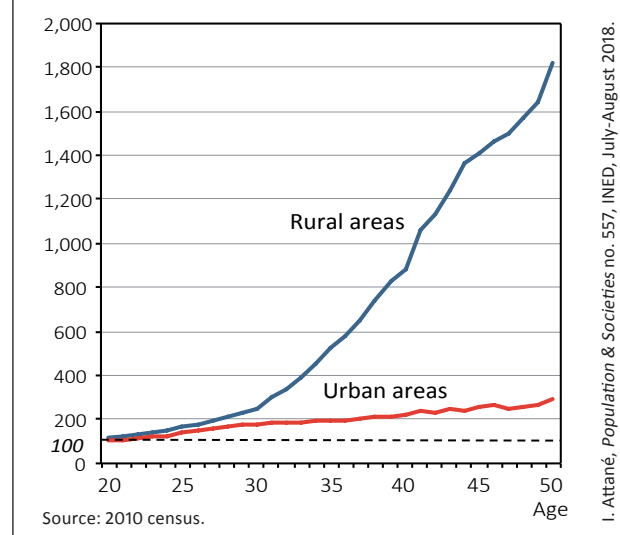
Structured around the patrilineal and patriarchal family, Chinese society attaches great importance to marriage and still considers it an essential step in transitioning to adulthood as well as a social status marker [1]. Heterosexual marriage remains the norm, as a socially imposed prerequisite to conjugal sexuality and childbearing; and future spouses seldom cohabit before marriage [2]. According to the most recent census (2010), 92% of Chinese men and 97% of Chinese women have been married at least once by age 35. Permanent singlehood is relatively rare but primarily affects men in rural areas: at age 50, over 4% have never been married, compared to less than 2% of city dwellers and less than 1% of rural or urban women.

Male singlehood and the shortage of women

The vast majority of single people in China are men, and their proportions are particularly high in rural areas. This

includes young rural men: among rural singles aged 35, there are over 500 men per 100 women; for men aged 50, the ratio is nearly 2000 per 100 (Figure 1). This phenomenon is related most notably to the numerical imbalance between the sexes, due in turn to an earlier situation of excess female mortality and, beginning in the 1980s, an abnormally high proportion of boys at birth because of prenatal sex selection (Figure 2) [3]. Whereas the numbers of women and men of marrying and reproductive age elsewhere in the world are approximately the same,⁽¹⁾ in China in 2010 the proportion of men was found to be slightly higher (103 men per 100 women in the 20–50 age range). The share of men of all marital

Figure 1. Number of single men per 100 single women, by age (China, 2010), in %

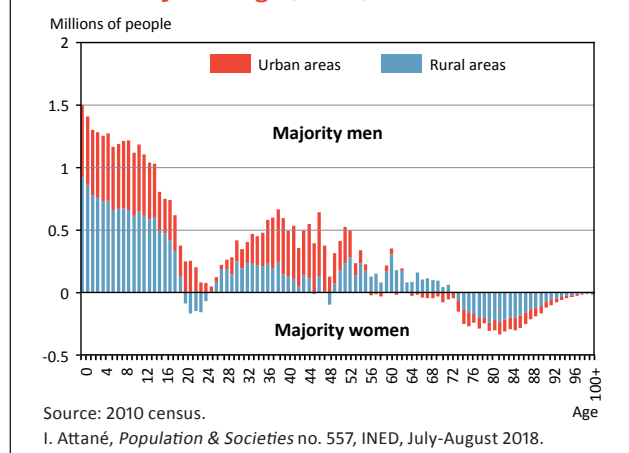


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(1) According to the United Nations (2017), the sex ratio in 2015 in the world at large (excluding China and India) was 101 men per 100 women, aged 20 to 50. A few countries (particularly Qatar and Saudi Arabia) have marked overproportions of adult men, due primarily to heavy immigration by male manual workers.

Figure 2. Surplus of men over women in China by each age (2010), in millions



statuses combined is actually larger in cities, which are now home to 8 million of the 11 million excess men aged 20 to 50, due in part to the flow of migrant workers from rural regions. Nonetheless, a man's chances of finding a wife are lower if he lives in the countryside, especially if he is poor. The fact that single men outnumber single women (Figure 1), and that women can migrate to a city or a different province more easily than before, means that single women now have a wider choice of potential husbands. So they tend to choose men who can provide them with material comforts [1]—men who are therefore more often city dwellers.

The presence of excess men in the population combines with internal migration and women's quest for upward social mobility through marriage to explain the heavy over-representation of men among never-married people in rural China (Figure 1). The DefiChina survey sheds light on the situation of single men in three rural districts of Shaanxi province particularly affected by this phenomenon (see Box). One of its findings is that, although the shortage of women does create competition between men looking for a wife, the social and economic dimensions of male singlehood cannot be ignored. As has been shown for other rural regions in China [4], unequal access to marriage and its prerogatives in this extremely rigid normative context is but one in a whole set of inequalities.

Early and permanent singlehood, especially among poor men

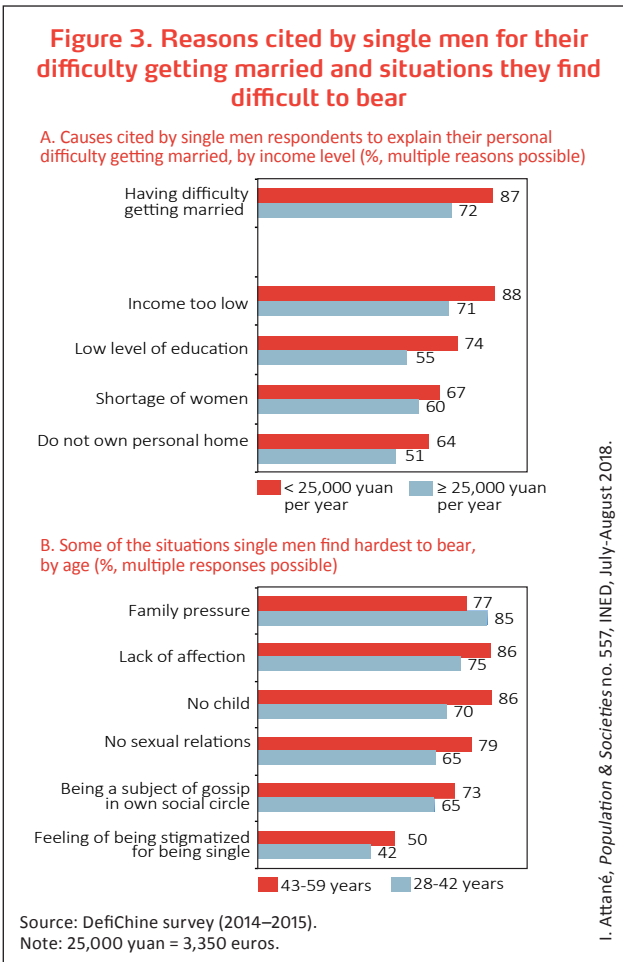
People in China marry at younger ages than in neighbouring countries [5], and even earlier in rural areas (where, in 2010, men's average age at marriage was 24.8 and women's 22.8, compared to 26.2 and 24.4 in cities). As elsewhere in the country [2], attachment to the institution of marriage is very strong among DefiChina survey respondents (nine in ten expressed it). However,

while respondents say they want to get married, the vast majority (85%) say they have difficulty doing so, specifying that lack of education, low income, or not owning their own home make them unattractive potential husbands (Table, Figure 3A). As in studies of other regions of China, the single male respondents in this survey are socioeconomically underprivileged: their average income is 30% below that of married men, and they have on average four fewer years of education, though these gaps narrow in the younger generations (Table).

Most single respondents also mention the shortage of women as a major hindrance to their getting married (Figure 3A). As with the other factors, poor men feel this situation more keenly than others: women shun them, and they would be hard put to pay the rising costs of marriage (which include not only the wedding ceremony but also matchmaker fees, the "bride price" paid to the woman's family by two in three married respondents, and the purchase or renovation of a home). For some single men, this situation involves at least deferring their marriage plans until they have saved some money or bought a home. But their chances of getting married begin to fade before age 30, the age by which 93% of married respondents had attained that status.

The weight of norms

In Chinese society, marriage attests to filial piety, which entails having sons who will perpetuate the patrilineal family and ensure that parents are protected in their old age. It also enhances the status of families within the community, and generally remains an important vector of social recognition [1]. These norms imply that the social and family injunction to marry impacts heavily on single men, particularly young ones (Figure 3B). While parents tend to lessen the pressure on older bachelors as they resign themselves to the idea that their son may never marry, single men themselves have increasingly become a target of mockery. As stigmatized individuals, they are socially more isolated than married men, and their mutual support networks are considerably smaller (Table). Moreover, this state of social isolation, often associated with higher poverty, further reduces these men's chances of getting married, as acquaintanceship networks play an extremely important role in establishing contact between future spouses (85% of the survey's married respondents had recourse to a matchmaker to meet their wife; half of them paid for that service). Single men are excluded from certain practices in China. Having a romantic relationship, living in a union, and having regular sexual relations are mostly prerogatives of married men. Of the survey's single respondents, only half have ever had a girlfriend or sexual relations (Table). However, a greater share of younger (than older) single



men have had romantic and sexual experiences; their behaviour is slightly closer to that of married men: 48% of younger men (aged 28–42) have had at least one girlfriend and sexual relations at least once in their lives (as opposed to only 18% of older men). Conversely, nearly half of older single men (aged 43–59) have had neither of those experiences (48%, compared to 26% of younger men). These differences (which persist with education and income levels kept equal) are related to the specific characteristics and experiences of the different generations of single men, including the fact that younger single men migrate more often than the older ones. Nonetheless, at least two in three respondents, regardless of age, find the lack of affection as well as the absence of a child and sexual relations extremely difficult to bear (Figure 3B) – aspirations that can hardly be satisfied outside of marriage, given the weight of social and family norms.

Single men are not more inclined to engage in high-risk or socially disapproved practices

Though single men by definition do not have access to marital sex, the survey’s single men do not turn more often than married men to alternative practices such as sex with prostitutes, a behaviour presented in China as a

Table: Respondent characteristics by marital status

	Single			Married		
	Age 28-42	Age 43-59	All single	Age 28-42	Age 43-59	All married
Number of respondents	312	215	527	329	326	655
Socioeconomic characteristics						
Years of schooling ⁽¹⁾	6.8	3.6	5.5	10.1	8.9	9.5
Average annual income (last 12 months, in yuan) ⁽²⁾	15,864	11,636	14,134	23,183	18,804	21,004
Social relations						
No relatives or friends to rely on in a time of need (%) ⁽¹⁾	14.7	24.1	18.8	8.0	10.7	9.4
Little or very little participation in social events or activities ⁽¹⁾ (%) ⁽¹⁾	62.9	82.6	70.9	47.3	54.0	50.6
Romantic relationships and sexual activity						
Have had at least one girlfriend (%)	58.8	36.4	49.6	n/a	n/a	n/a
Have had sexual relations at least once (%) ⁽¹⁾	63.0	33.5	51.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Have used sexual services ⁽²⁾ at least once (%) (NS)	23.9	14.9	20.2	24.9	18.5	21.6
Have used sexual services ⁽³⁾ in the last 12 months (%) (NS)	16.1	8.8	13.1	17.3	13.8	15.5
Average number of sexual partners ever ⁽¹⁾	1.49	0.7	1.13	2.31	1.65	1.98
Experiencing or have experienced difficulty getting married (%) ⁽¹⁾	79.7	92.1	84.8	34.5	30.0	32.3

(1) This variable included men who either did not participate or seldom participated in a birth or first birthday (*zhousui*) ceremony in the 12 months prior to the survey and either did not visit or seldom visited friends in the month prior to the survey.
(2) This variable refers to men who responded in the affirmative to one of the following three questions: have you “ever exchanged money for sexual relations”, “ever given a present in exchange for sexual relations”, “had sexual relations with a prostitute at least once?”
(3) This variable refers to men who reported having engaged in the last 12 months in one of the three practices cited above and/or had massages that included the genitals.
Note: Statistical tests are of the significance of differences between married and single men (*: p ≤ 0.01 and NS: p ≥ 0.1).
Source: DefiChine survey (2014–2015).

potential threat to the social order [1]. The DefiChine study shows that the specifically male practice of using sexual services (defined in the Table) is independent of marital status: over 20% of the men in the survey have used them (Table). As for homosexuality, strongly disapproved in Chinese society, it is more widespread among married than single men (8% have had sexual relations with another man at least once, as compared to 4% of single men). On average, single men have had fewer sexual partners than married men, a finding that once again disqualifies the high-risk behaviour assumption. Single men also drink less: 17% got drunk at least once in the month preceding the survey (a lower figure than for married men: 26%), though they more often report feeling depressed (66% reported being depressed at times or often during the week before the survey, compared to 51% of married men). It is also true that income is an important determinant of both sexual services use and alcohol consumption. Relatively well-off single men, younger on average than poor ones, engage in both those practices nearly as often as married men.

A situation that will likely escalate

The question of male singlehood in rural areas is by no means new in sociology or demography. But in China,

Box. The DefiChine survey on living conditions of single men in rural China

This survey, part of the DefiChine project (funded by France's national research agency [Agence nationale de la recherche, ANR] and the heSam Université Centre for research and education [Pres HeSam]), was conducted in 2014–2015 with 1,182 men aged 28 to 59, of whom 655 were married and 527 single, living in three rural districts of Ankang, in southern Shaanxi province. Respondents were selected using a stratified random sampling method. The survey findings shed light on a regional situation and therefore should not be generalized to rural China at large. However, they do converge with findings from studies conducted in other regions of the country [4].

The three districts studied have an extremely high proportion of men aged 20 to 59, and their shares of single men are among the highest in the country (from 158 to 185 single males aged 15 or over per 100 women in 2010, as opposed to an average of 150 for rural China in general). The districts are poor (per capita GDP is twice below the national average). Men there are exposed to permanent singlehood as young as age 28, as the probability of getting married declines sharply after that age (91% of married respondents got married before age 29 – a proportion equivalent to that observed in the Chinese rural population in 2010). Two age groups were studied: men aged 28 to 42 (born after 1973, when fertility in China began to fall sharply) and men aged 43 to 59 (born when fertility rates stood at 5 to 6 children per woman). Since Chinese men marry women a few years younger than themselves, the numerical decrease in the later cohorts exacerbated the existing sex imbalance on the marriage market.

The survey questionnaire comprises seven sections: 1) sociodemographic profile, 2) opinions on social relations between the sexes and gender equality, 3) how spouses are chosen, 4) norms and sexual behaviour, 5) knowledge of and practices related to reproductive health, 6) participation in social events and leisure activities, 7) perceived impact of certain demographic phenomena. The quantitative survey was reinforced with a qualitative component (51 semi-structured interviews).

Note: For more information on the survey, see <https://defichine.site.ined.fr/en/>

it has become a major social and policy preoccupation [6] due to the sex imbalance at birth in generations born after 1980, which threatens to exacerbate the phenomenon in the coming years. Among people under 30 in 2010 – those who will constitute the 20–50 age group in 2030 – there are 109 per 100 women, amounting to a surplus of over 23 million men (Figure 2). Another reason why male singlehood has received much attention in Chinese politics, academics, and media is that it is still considered an abnormal situation capable of destabilizing the country's social order founded on the family and intergenerational solidarity. Yet no measures have been implemented to support single men in rural areas,

particularly to loosen the rigid family norms or combat poverty, social exclusion, or the increasing monetization of marriage. The priority of the Chinese government has been instead to try to remedy the sex imbalance at birth, notably by abandoning the one-child policy in 2015 [7] and by taking steps to enhance the image of women in society [3]. If the recent decline in the sex imbalance at birth continues (from 118 boys per 100 girls in 2010, it fell to 114 in 2015, the normal ratio being around 106), the problem may become less acute by the next generation, around 2050. In the meantime, singlehood may well become inevitable for a still greater proportion of men, men who will therefore be more heterogeneous socially than at present.

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Abstract

Those who are single in rural China are almost exclusively men. The presence of excess men in the population combines with internal migration and women's quest for upward social mobility through marriage to explain this phenomenon. The DefiChine survey sheds light on the situation of single men in three rural districts of Shaanxi. One of its findings is that, although the shortage of women does create competition between men looking for a wife, the social and economic dimensions of male singlehood cannot be ignored.

Keywords

rural China, male singlehood, sex imbalance, social norms, sexual behaviour



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