

Book Review: Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China by Leta Hong Fincher

*In this new book, **Leta Hong Fincher** argues that a discourse around young, unmarried 'leftover women' in China is propagated through state media news reports and television shows to mask the persisting sex ratio imbalance in the country and to encourage well-educated women to marry and have children sooner. **Yang Shen** believes that Fincher should be applauded for bringing together the under-theorised themes of women's property rights, the rights of LGBT groups, and domestic abuse. A thought-provoking book, although some arguments are weakened by insufficient evidence and untrustworthy sources.*

Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China. Leta Hong Fincher. Zed Books. April 2014.

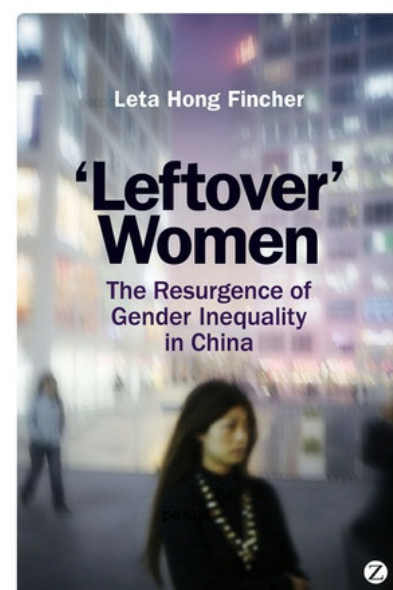
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[Leta Hong Fincher](#) was a journalist before completing a PhD in Sociology at Beijing's Tsinghua University. This book is based on her PhD project on the under-researched connections between leftover women, China's property market, and gender inequality. Fincher has previously written articles discussing similar issues for the [New York Times](#), CNN, and Ms. Magazine, through which these topics have already gained some popularity. With an abundance of interview quotes and contemporaneous media reports, this book is quite readable and has the potential to attract a wide audience.

According to Fincher, the term 'leftover woman' in China 'is widely used to describe an urban, professional female in her late twenties or older who is still single' (p.2). In Chapter 1, Fincher examines the leftover women discourse mediated through 'state media news reports, surveys, columns, cartoons and television shows' (p.15), and argues that two reasons account for the state promoting the leftover women discourse: one is to maintain social stability in the context of the persisting sex ratio imbalance – China has [32million more men](#) aged under 20 than women – that prevents a lot of men from finding wives; the other is to upgrade the 'quality' of the populace by urging well-educated women to marry. It is an insightful observation indeed that the state serves as a latent driver, disseminating this stigmatizing 'leftover' women discourse, which arguably has a profound impact on unmarried women over the age of 25.

Chapter 2 considers how Chinese women have been 'shut out of arguably the biggest accumulation of residential real-estate wealth in history' because the pressure they experience in trying to avoid becoming 'leftover' means that they often 'give up too much bargaining power within the marriage' (p.12). Chapter 3 further deals with how 'many parents discriminate against their own daughters by buying expensive homes for their sons only', leading to a gendered wealth gap in house buying.

The book is written in an accessible style, allowing general readers access to the subject. It also adopts an inclusive approach in that it covers a wide range of issues in relation to women's property rights, including the rights of LGBT groups in Chapter 3 and Chapter 6, and the relationship between domestic abuse and women's lack of property rights in Chapter 5. These issues are rarely discussed together when considering gender inequality in China, so the author is to be congratulated for this effort.



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However, I did find that in places the evidence provided is insufficient to support the arguments presented. For example, readers are introduced to a female informant who has a university degree but left her job because 'she wanted to make herself a more attractive marriage candidate, less intimidating to suitors'. She is quoted as saying "my most important duty is to find a good man to marry" (p.39). The author analyses the case by noting that 'the state media campaign regarding "leftover" women has prompted some highly educated women to quit their jobs even before they get married' (p.39). Aside from questioning how rare this case is, I find a lack of coherence between the analysis and the quotes as the informant did not explicitly suggest that she was influenced by the 'leftover' discourse.

The imprecision in analysis can also be identified in Chapter 3. The author reveals that the informant Shang got married because she believed that she was getting older. The author links her anxiety with 'the "leftover" women age threshold' (p.107). Again, the informant did not specify the connection between her anxiety and the prescribed age of 'leftover' women advocated by the state media. By adopting the 'leftover' women discourse in a one-size-fits-all fashion, it can be argued that the author not only exaggerates the influence that the 'leftover' discourse imposes on women, but also ignores the intricate complexity of the reasons for their anxiety. It is not difficult to recognise that unmarried women's anxiety around their increasing age existed before the emergence of the 'leftover' women discourse, and furthermore that it is seen in other countries where the 'leftover' women discourse does not exist.

The author cites a remarkable amount of online sources to support her argument, showing engagement with a variety of sources. However Fincher doesn't acknowledge that they may not be completely trustworthy. In Chapter 2, the author cites the [2012 Horizon and iFeng.com Report](#), noting that women's names were endorsed on only 30 per cent of marital home deals (p.46). First, there are perhaps questions as to the credibility of the report, as it did not suggest how many informants were involved, nor how the survey was conducted. Furthermore, it is a pity that the author did not mention the trend indicated by the report, of a 10.2% increase in the number of women's names on home deeds compared to the time prior to 2006, which can be interpreted as women's rising power in property rights.

Although there are thought-provoking points throughout, I find some of the findings intrinsically contradictory. For

instance, in Chapter 3, Fincher reports that a daughter's parents 'often decline to help buy a home' for their daughter (p.78). The author implies that it is because the parents consider buying a home to be man's responsibility (p.83). However, the author finds out that many women contribute their whole savings to help their partners to buy homes without putting their names on the deeds. The daughters' behaviour is in contrast to their parents' perception that men should be the home provider. Considering the author's finding that a daughter has a sense of filial piety to her parents (p.82), I cannot help but wonder how the parents view their daughters' behaviour of contributing their savings without being entitled to the property? Does it lead to any intergenerational conflicts? The book unfortunately does not discuss this.

Finally, the use of the word 'resurgence' is somewhat problematic in this context. As suggested in the Introduction, 'this book argues that the state-sponsored media campaign about "leftover" women is part of a broad resurgence of gender inequality in post-socialist China' (p.3). Resurgence here implies that gender equality was once achieved. I consider gender equality to have never been achieved and indeed that gender inequality has been persistent throughout China's history (see [Liu](#), [Croll](#) and [Stacey](#) for further reading). In Chapter 4, Fincher conceptualises 'resurgence' by tracing back to the Song dynasty (960-1279), upholding that women at that time 'had substantial, independent ownership and control of property' (p.110). She then compares the women in the Song Dynasty to those in contemporary China, claiming that 'Chinese women's property rights have steadily eroded in the post-socialist, rural-to-urban transformation' (p.131). The way in which she compares the women in contemporary China with the women one thousand years ago is problematic; although the author quotes historian [Bernhardt](#), it seems that she disregards Bernhardt's conclusion that 'there was no "half-share law" in the Song and indeed could not have been. Instead, the principles of patrilineal succession applied, and women enjoyed inheritance rights only by default, in the absence of brothers and sons.' (p.8). Chapter 4 leaves itself open to critiques of reductionism by merely discussing property rights without considering the corresponding social economic context.

The dominant discourse among the Chinese media and public currently focuses on how women strategise to add their names to the deeds without paying for or paying very little for property. This book engineers to reverse the abovementioned discourse by discussing how women are disadvantaged in the real estate market. Unfortunately, by intertwining the 'leftover women' discourse and real estate market, the author's intention to create a novel approach to demonstrate how women are disadvantaged in contemporary China fails to meet its purpose due to its reductionist approach, the not well-grounded evidence, and the insufficiently supported arguments.

Above all, this book looks likely to be controversial. Nonetheless it has the potential to be a bestseller due to the timeliness of the topic, Fincher's eye-catching arguments, and the already established reputation of the author, regardless of how selective the views encapsulated in this book may be. Once again, it is worth saying that the author should be recognised for bringing together the rarely-discussed issues of women's property rights, the rights of LGBT groups, and domestic abuse.

Yang Shen is a PhD candidate at the LSE Gender Institute funded by China Scholarship Council. Her current research focuses on peasant migrant workers in the catering Sector in Shanghai. Her research interests cover gender and work, migration studies, contemporary China Studies, and qualitative research methods. Yang has a BA in History from Fudan University and a MSc (with distinction) in Higher Education from Shanghai Jiaotong University. She worked as an intern at UN Women and she continues to work as a columnist for the newspaper [UKChinese](#). [Read more reviews by Yang](#).

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