

# Between Poverty and Normative Pressure

The Quality of Life of Never Married Men in Rural Shaanxi

ISABELLE ATTANÉ AND XUEYAN YANG

**ABSTRACT:** This article is based on data from a study undertaken in 2014-2015 in rural southern Shaanxi to analyse the relationship between bachelors who have not chosen to be single and their satisfaction with life. Its aims are twofold: firstly, to explain the differences in the quality of life between married and single men by means of conventional variables (socio-economic profile, state of health, intensity of social relations); secondly, to explore quality of life factors associated with relations these men have with women and which, to our knowledge, have never hitherto been taken into account in analyses of inequalities in life satisfaction in China. In particular, we attempt to see the extent to which inability to contract a marriage is likely to affect quality of life, especially through the social injunction to marry and the social stigmatisation attached to bachelorhood, while at the same time exploring how quality of life varies in relation to the frequency of intimate relations with partners in a context where sex remains socially associated with marriage. In this way, we bring to light individual and contextual features that can be considered to contribute to the growth of inequality in life satisfaction resulting from socio-economic circumstances.

**KEYWORDS:** Rural China, Quality of Life, Bachelors, Marriage, Gender Imbalance, Sexuality.

## Introduction

Inequalities in terms of satisfaction with life have been on the rise in China over the past few decades, linked to growing disparities in income and living standards following economic reform (Brockmann et al. 2009; Easterlin et al. 2012; Abbott et al. 2012). Another factor of inequality, and hence potentially of dissatisfaction with life, nevertheless remains little studied, namely, the possibility or otherwise of contracting a marriage. This form of union remains the socially dominant model (Yu and Xie 2015), yet men seeking to marry are significantly greater in number than women in the same situation (Attané 2013). Women also tend to favour partners likely to offer them the prospect of upward social mobility. Further, the opportunities to meet potential partners are limited for men from a rural background and the least privileged socio-economic categories (Li et al. 2010), some of whom find themselves forced to put off their plans for marriage or even give up on them altogether (Das Gupta, Ebenstein, and Sharygin 2013). Coupled with the practice of social hypergamy of women, the excess number of men as compared to that of women within the never married population (in the order of 35% among 20-59 year-olds in 2010 [PCO 2012]) means that today's Chinese marriage market is extremely tight (Eklund and Attané 2017). Competition among men in search of a potential spouse compromises the marriage prospects for a non-negligible portion of them who still, however, generally harbour this goal.

This article is based on data from a survey undertaken in rural southern Shaanxi in 2014-2015 to analyse the relationship between unwanted bachelorhood and men's satisfaction with life. Its aims are twofold: firstly, to explain the differences in the quality of life between married and never married men by means of conventional variables, namely those describing

their socio-economic profile, state of health, and intensity of social relations; and secondly, to explore the quality of life factors linked to the relations these men have with women and which, to our knowledge, have never hitherto been taken into account in analyses of the inequalities in life satisfaction in China. In particular, we try to see, on the one hand, the extent to which an inability to fulfil their normative desires in terms of marital life (that is, contracting a heterosexual marriage) is associated with a lower quality of life, especially on account of the social injunction to marry and the social stigmatisation attached to bachelorhood. On the other hand, we explore how their quality of life varies in relation to the frequency of the intimate relations that never married men have with women, in a context where sexual relations remains socially associated with marriage. In this way we bring to light individual and contextual characteristics that can be considered to contribute to the growth of inequalities in terms of life satisfaction resulting from socio-economic circumstances.

## Examining the relation between marriage and life satisfaction

Satisfaction with life is a concept that is largely based on a subjective evaluation of various notions, including, for example, an individual's health, education, income, personal fulfilment, and social position (OECD 2017). This feeling may also be influenced by the way in which individuals relate to their social environment and adapt to the events of the life cycle, in particular their (in)ability to attain the objectives they have set for themselves. The responses to questions about life satisfaction are, however, also likely to reflect normative notions and desires (Veenhoven 1996).

**Table 1 – Characteristics of the population of the districts studied**

|                                                     | Hanbin<br>汉滨区 | Xunyang<br>旬阳县 | Shiquan<br>石泉县 |
|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| Population in 2010                                  | 870,126       | 426,677        | 171,097        |
| Portion of the population with a rural hukou (in %) | 77.4          | 87.7           | 82.3           |
| Men per 100 women (total pop.)                      | 107.6         | 113.2          | 116.6          |
| Men per 100 women (never married men aged 15 and +) | 158           | 183            | 185            |

Source: 2010 population census (PCO 2012).

Research on China has mainly been interested in the socio-economic determinants of the wellbeing felt by individuals (Appleton and Song 2008; Chen et al. 2015; Easterlin et al. 2012; Zhou and Xie 2016), whereas their ability to attain the objectives they have set for themselves in terms of marital and family life is rarely measured. Even when this notion is taken into account, it is only done so partially, by reference merely to a person's formal marital status (Abbott et al. 2016). The fact of being married or not is, admittedly, a relevant factor of satisfaction in life, since it goes some way to informing us about the way in which people fit into a family structure at a particular time (Abbott and Wallace 2012; Brockmann et al. 2009) that is likely to provide them with a certain material and emotional security and support in daily life. It says nothing, however, about the circumstances likely to impede an individual's marriage prospects or the potential impact on their quality of life, faced with the impossibility of fulfilling their normative desires in this respect. However, in contemporary Chinese society, the possibility (or impossibility) of marrying and forming a family remains determinant in people's passage through life and the way they are able to position themselves in their family and social environment. Heterosexual marriage, which remains the norm (Yu and Xie 2015), conditions access to a range of social and family prerogatives, thereby marking a clear delineation between adults who are married and those who are not (Attané et al. 2013). Similarly, when unmarried status continues beyond a certain age, it becomes subject to social stigmatisation for men and women alike (Wei and Zhang 2015; Zarafonitis 2017). Among rural men who have been studied in recent years, a bachelor life that is not the result of personal choice is also accompanied by a range of frustrations (familial, emotional, sexual, in addition to a lack of social recognition) that can affect men's quality of life (Li et al. 2010; Yang et al. 2017). Further, an inability to contract a marriage is often perceived as a personal failure (Zhou and Hesketh 2017). It is therefore relevant to try to understand the relationship between non-chosen bachelorhood and satisfaction with life of the men concerned, in a normative environment that leaves little room for informal unions (Yu and Xie 2015).

### *A study into the lives of bachelors*

The study was conducted in 2014–2015 in three rural districts (Hanbin 汉滨区, Xunyang 旬阳县, and Shiquan 石泉县) within the municipality of Ankang (安康市) in southern Shaanxi in order to analyse the lives of never married men in a context where there is a strong attachment to marriage,<sup>(1)</sup> but in which the gender imbalance in the marriage market is likely to constrain a fringe of the male population within a bachelorhood not of their choosing. These districts were therefore selected for two notable reasons: on the one hand, because they have a strong gender imbalance (with re-

spectively 158, 183, and 185 men for every 100 women among the population of never married males who were 15 years of age or older in 2010, as against 151 in the overall rural areas of Shaanxi and 149 in rural China as a whole), partly due to a significant female emigration (Jin et al. 2013); and on the other hand, because they are marked by poverty, which has been shown to constitute a determining factor in an individual's ability to marry or not (Li et al. 2010). The districts studied are located in a particularly poor region, within a zone that is classified as priority in terms of poverty reduction and development by the central government (Colin 2013), with a per capita GDP under 13,000 *yuan* in 2010, which is less than half of the overall Shaanxi average (around 27,100 *yuan*, as against around 30,000 *yuan* for the whole of China) (SBS 2011).

In order to determine the characteristics of never married men who have not chosen this way of life, the analyses below take into account only those who do not cohabit with a partner (either male or female)<sup>(2)</sup> and who wish to get married. They are differentiated according to whether they encounter difficulties or not in realising this goal and compared to the married population. Satisfaction with life is not measured as such in the study. This topic is addressed through the quality of life and sexual satisfaction over the past 12 months as expressed by the respondents, together with other characteristics providing objective information about their life. As the study concentrates on the characteristics of the respondents at the time of their participation in the survey, it provides but a slight amount of information about their lives up to that point. The characteristics of individuals that have been developed over the course of their life and that are likely to explain differences in quality of life at the time of the study are therefore not factored into the analyses. Furthermore, these fit into pre-defined frameworks (namely, marriage and the ability to marry) seen as determining elements in an individual's appreciation of their satisfaction. However, they leave aside other nonmaterial factors likely to contribute to it, which are not measured in our study.

### *Methodology of the study*

A stratified random sampling enabled us to set up a sample of men aged between 28 and 59 based on the Bureau of Family Planning registers provided by the local authorities. The sample includes 656 men who were either married, had remarried, or lived with their partner in a kind of marital relationship at the time of the study (referred to below as married people), 526

1. The *DefiChine* project is described on the website: <http://defichine.site.ined.fr/en/> (accessed on 9 March 2017)
2. People living together outside of marriage is only a very marginal phenomenon (concerning less than 2% of men in our sample). We have therefore not been able to devote specific study to this phenomenon.

who had never been married, and 98 divorcees or widowers (not considered here) (that is, a 95.4% response rate). The questionnaire was carried out in conditions that guaranteed anonymity and the freedom of response of the respondents (use of individual tablets within a dedicated space). One interviewer was, however, available to provide them with technical assistance if required. Before beginning to distribute the questionnaires, an interviewer read out to each respondent the rules on protection of privacy and explained that it was possible for him to withdraw from the survey at any time. The stratified sample, in which the never married men were deliberately over-represented to enable us to ascertain their characteristics, was then weighted on the basis of the age structure observed in this age group in rural Shaanxi in the 2010 census for each of these two groups of marital status, which makes it representative of the rural bachelor population in the 28-59 age range from that province from the point of view of its age composition.

The quantitative component of the study was completed by a qualitative dimension (31 extensive interviews) conducted independently with the men, both those who were married and those who were single. A few extracts are presented here by way of illustration. These interviews were conducted in June 2015 by two Chinese students who are members of the project team. Men were interviewed either in their home village or during their temporary stay in Xi'an. In order to preserve their anonymity, the names given here are pseudonyms and their home village is not mentioned.

### ***Most bachelors have not chosen to be single***

Our sample shows a very clear attachment to heterosexual marriage, nearly nine out of ten men being of the view that every man (86.8%) or woman (87.5%) has to get married, and the overwhelming majority of never married men also declaring that they would like to marry (82.4 %). This strong aspiration is, however, difficult to reconcile with the selective nature of the local marriage market, in which women who are likely to be seeking to get married are significantly fewer in number than men in the same situation (Table 1), and also have requirements in terms of social hypergamy. Whilst marriage is a goal the majority of men aspire to attain, it is not actually within the reach of all of them, since most never married men (86.4%) claim to have encountered difficulties in bringing this about.

The reasons invoked by never married men to explain their difficulty in marrying are mainly economic in nature (in particular, low income, even poverty, being quoted by more than 80% of them). This confirms that women in this region tend to prefer men who can offer them social upward mobility through marriage—a pragmatism illustrated by Shen Xianjiang, a 37-year-old bachelor:

[Here] People say: "Marry a man, marry a man, have clothes to wear and food to spare. Dressing a little better, living a little better, that's called marrying a man." <sup>(3)</sup>

The economic stakes around the choice of the partner and the selective character of the marriage market are also identified by Yang Fan, a 41-year-old bachelor:

I don't have a house at home. If you don't have money, how are you going to look for one? (...) It's not possible for you not to have money or a house (...). Housing and money are the main things. <sup>(4)</sup>

This is also clear from the frequency with which not owning one's home is cited to explain the difficulties experienced in getting married (a cause invoked by nearly two out of every three bachelors: 61.4%). Wei Wu, a 39-year-old bachelor, bears this out:

In winning a wife, a man always has to have a house, don't you know? If you don't have a house, then they might not even consider you because of your status. <sup>(5)</sup>

While economic factors are presented by never married men as major obstacles to getting married, the lack of women on the marriage market, put forward by two thirds of them (66.1%), is also a major concern. This is a recurrent theme, as illustrated by Wang Fei, a 24-year-old bachelor:

In our area, anyway, [unmarried men] go around looking for someone to introduce a wife. Anyway, as soon as they try, it's "not many girls here, not many girls there." We ourselves have seen, anyway, that there are lots of boys and fewer girls. <sup>(6)</sup>

The likelihood of men and women marrying is thus, in the mind of several interviewees, directly linked to the gender imbalance, as Shao Qing, a 25-year-old bachelor, puts it in a very pragmatic way:

I've heard that some men can't find wives, but women can get married. It doesn't matter whether they're ugly or pretty, all of them can get married. <sup>(7)</sup>

### ***Poverty and poor quality of life: The "double trouble" of bachelors***

Overall, never married men claim to have a poor quality of life much more frequently than married men (57.8% and 28% respectively). But this is the case mainly of those encountering difficulties in marrying, who consequently find themselves faced with the impossibility of realising their normative desires in terms of marital life. Nearly two-thirds of them (61.6%) say that they have a poor quality of life, as against one third of those who do not experience such problems (33.9%). Conversely, marriage is associated with a better quality of life, as shown by the rare studies on China that broach this subject (Knight, Song, and Gunatilaka 2009; Zhou and Hesketh 2017), and its protective effect is all the more apparent as marriage longevity increases (35.8% of men who have been married for less than ten years claim to have a poor quality of life, against 20.9% who have been married for more than 20 years).

These differences in quality of life are to be understood in the context of a whole range of inequalities among men according to whether they are married or not, although these cannot be simply imputed to the marital status of the individuals concerned. We need to distinguish those factors (income, education, social relations) that feed into certain others (state of health, possibility to marry) and which, taken together, contribute to defining quality of life, from those that, in the Chinese social context, stem di-

3. Interview conducted in a rural area of Ankang in June 2015.

4. Interview conducted in a rural area of Ankang in June 2015.

5. This respondent, from Ankang, was interviewed in Xi'an, where he lived temporarily in June 2015.

6. This respondent, from Ankang, was interviewed in Xi'an, where he lived temporarily in June 2015.

7. Interview conducted in a rural area of Ankang in June 2015.

**Table 2 – Socio-economic characteristics of those studied**

|                                                                                            | Never married men                                       |                                                            | Married men<br>N=655 | Statistical tests |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
|                                                                                            | Wishing to marry but encountering difficulties<br>N=375 | Wishing to marry but not encountering difficulties<br>N=59 |                      |                   |
| Median age                                                                                 | 39.6                                                    | 35.0                                                       | 42.0                 | (**/***)          |
| Average number of years spent at school                                                    | 5.3                                                     | 8.2                                                        | 9.5                  | (*/***)           |
| Portion having completed primary school (in %)                                             | 61.8                                                    | 78.6                                                       | 94.0                 | (**/***)          |
| Average annual personal income (1) (in yuan)                                               | 14,323                                                  | 17,744                                                     | 21,004               | (**/***)          |
| Assess their economic situation to be worse than that of others in their peer group (in %) | 77.3                                                    | 61.0                                                       | 44.0                 | (*/***)           |
| Home ownership (in %)                                                                      | 70.1                                                    | 61.0                                                       | 86.6                 | (**/***)          |

Note: The statistical tests measure the significance of the disparities observed between the various groups of men, the highest level of significance being represented by three stars, NS indicating that the discrepancies are not significant. The first statistical tests compare the two groups of bachelors, the second compare those who are married and those who are bachelors.

Statistical significance: \*\*\*:  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*:  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*:  $p \leq 0.1$ ; not significant (NS):  $p > 0.1$ .

(1) The average annual income is estimated here after conversion of a category-specific variable into a numerical one. It should therefore not be analysed as such, but only as an illustration of the differences between the various groups.

Source: compilations by the authors (DefiChine study, <http://defichine.site.ined.fr/en/>)

rectly from the fact of being married or not (social and family pressure, reduced sexual activity). In fact, the differences in quality of life between married and never married men—particularly those encountering difficulties in getting married—underline the selective nature of the Chinese marriage market, in which women tend to privilege partners who are the best endowed with social and economic capital (Eklund and Attané 2017). Facing an unwanted bachelorhood thus principally affects men from the most disadvantaged social backgrounds (Li et al. 2010), whose characteristics and living conditions are, independent of their marital status, less propitious to a good quality of life. Although they are not an indicator of the quality of life as such, material resources nonetheless set the conditions whereby individuals can realise the potential to achieve their own wellbeing (Abdallah and Stoll 2012). These conditions also depend on educational capital, recognised as facilitating the attainment of objectives in terms of professional and social life and thus as contributing to greater wellbeing (OECD 2017). From this perspective, never married men from our sample are, on the whole, the most disadvantaged (with a level of education and an average income inferior to those of married men), but they do not form a homogenous group (Table 2). On the one hand, there are those wishing to marry but not declaring any difficulty in achieving this—who are younger than the other bachelors and whose socio-economic features are more like those of married men (Table 2), including those relating to their quality of life. On the other hand, the most marginal men with respect to the marriage market are older overall, with lower educational capital and lower material resources, and who in the main state that they have a poor quality of life.

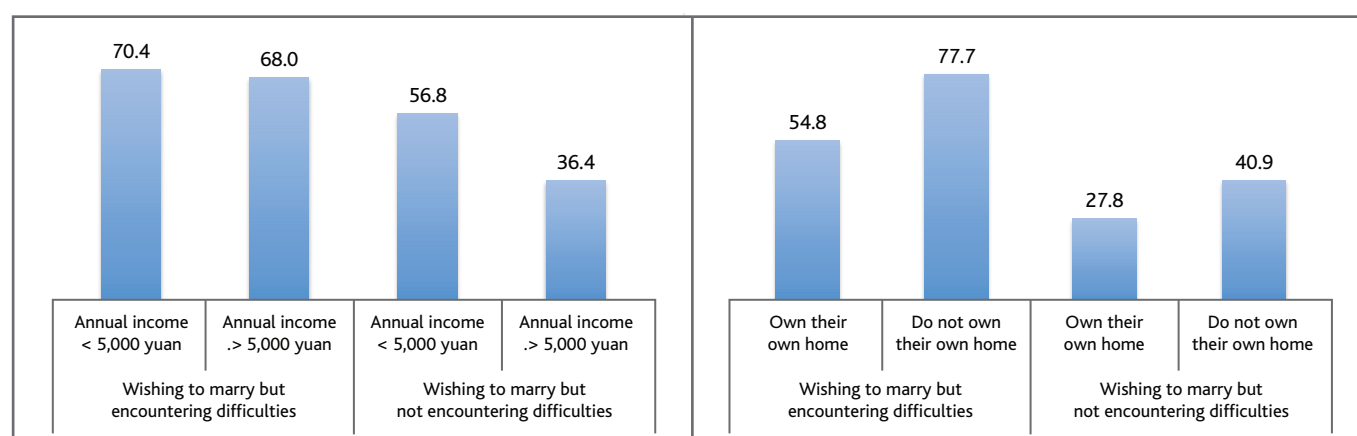
Home ownership—although relatively frequent in this region affected by problems of economic development—is another element that can affect an individual's quality of life (CASS 2013; Cheng et al. 2016), as it represents an essential guarantee of material security (Li and Song 2012). With regards to single men in particular, it is likely, as with their income or educational capital, to have an indirect effect on their quality of life by dint of the fact

that it increases their attractiveness on the marriage market and hence, as mentioned above, their chance of getting married. Indeed, Chinese women regard home ownership as a decisive factor in their choice of a spouse (CMSS 2014), testifying both to his financial capacity and to his ability to take on responsibility for a family (Wei and Zhang 2011). The never married men from our sample, particularly on account of the fact that they are in the main younger than the married men—and therefore have had less time to accumulate the capital needed to buy a home—are less often home owners (Table 2). These discrepancies are of a nature such as to contribute to their lower quality of life with respect to married men. This is because, on the one hand, they do not benefit from the material security that this brings, and on the other, because this shortcoming is likely to impede their marriage prospects (Wei, Zhang, and Liu 2012; Zhang, An, and Yu 2012). In short, of all the respondents, it is single men who find difficulty in marrying—and who in addition do not own their own place—who are more likely to declare the poorest quality of life (77.7%) (Graph 2).

### Poor health and social isolation

As with income, one's physical or psychological state of health is an important determinant of quality of life, since it is likely to influence one's ability to take on different social roles (such as holding down a job, keeping up social relations, etc.) (Klemenc-Ketis et al. 2011) and therefore one's relationship to one's environment. Although younger overall, the singles who are the most marginalised with respect to the marriage market are, once again, in a disadvantaged position relative to married men, with more than one in three (38.1%) making a negative assessment of their state of health (against 18.3% of married people), and nearly three-quarters (70.1%) routinely feeling their life to be a failure (against one in two married people: 47.9%) (Table 3).

Measuring quality of life also involves elements relative to an individual's interactions with their peers around them. Quality of life would seem to increase with the material, moral, and financial support provided by family

**Graph 1 – Proportion of never married men claiming to have a poor quality of life depending on their level of income and whether or not they own their own home (in %)****Table 3 – Indicators contributing to a poor quality of life depending on marital status**

|                                                                                                                     | Never married men                                       |                                                            | Married men<br>N=655 | Statistical tests |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
|                                                                                                                     | Wishing to marry but encountering difficulties<br>N=375 | Wishing to marry but not encountering difficulties<br>N=59 |                      |                   |
| Assess their health to be rather poor or very poor (in %)                                                           | 38.1                                                    | 10.2                                                       | 18.3                 | (**/***)          |
| Considered their life a failure either sometimes or most of the time during the week preceding the interview (in %) | 70.1                                                    | 49.2                                                       | 47.9                 | (**/***)          |
| Do not have a relative or friend to count on in case of sickness, financial problem, etc. (in %)                    | 15.0                                                    | 8.5                                                        | 6.9                  | (**/***)          |
| Average number of relatives or friends to count on in case of sickness, financial problem, etc.                     | 6.5                                                     | 8.4                                                        | 8.0                  | (**/***)          |
| Absence of social participation <sup>(1)</sup> (in %)                                                               | 16.6                                                    | 12.1                                                       | 5.5                  | (**/***)          |

Note: The statistical tests measure the significance of the disparities observed between the various groups of men, the highest level of significance being represented by three stars, NS indicating that the discrepancies are not significant. The first statistical tests compare the two groups of bachelors; the second compare those who are married and those who are bachelors.

Statistical significance: \*\*\*:  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*:  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*:  $p \leq 0.1$ ; not significant (NS):  $p > 0.1$ .

(1) Absence of social participation here means not having participated in any birth ceremony, or *zhousui* (celebrated on the first anniversary of a child's birth), or birthday during the course of the year preceding the study, or having paid a visit to any friends during the previous month.

Source: compilations by the authors (DefiChine study, <http://defichine.site.ined.fr/en/>)

members or friends (Helliwell, Layard and Jeffrey 2013; Watson, Pichler, and Wallace 2010), and social relations would tend to cushion the negative effects of stress on individual wellbeing (Abdallah and Stoll 2012). In our sample, the greater social and familial isolation of never married men, even more so for those who encounter difficulties in finding a partner to marry, is also a likely factor contributing to their lower quality of life (Table 3).

All the conventional indicators of quality of life go to explaining the reduced quality of life of never married men with respect to the married ones, yet without it being possible to determine the respective weight of these causes that are closely entwined with each other. It nevertheless remains the case that while a disadvantaged socio-economic situation has an undeniable influence on the quality of life of individuals, it also has an impact, in the specific context of China, on the possibilities available to men to marry. It therefore acts in a dual manner on their quality of life, their single status that they have not freely chosen bringing into play aggravating factors from this point of view.

## The pressure of the normative environment

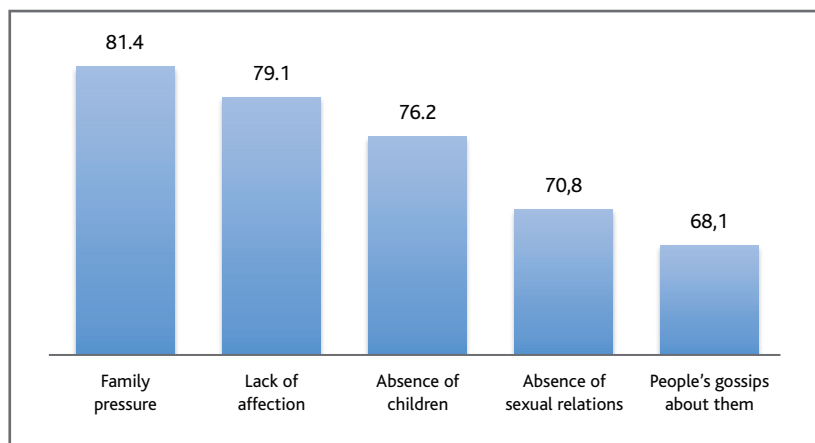
The norm of marriage to which, as indicated above, those in our sample group strongly subscribe is barely questioned by the interviewees. Zheng Tong, a 34-year-old bachelor for whom the idea of not seeking a partner to marry would be a kind of physical anomaly, illustrates the strength of the norm in favour of this form of union:

I personally feel that it is inappropriate not to marry. (...) If you're physically normal, then you will look for someone. <sup>(8)</sup>

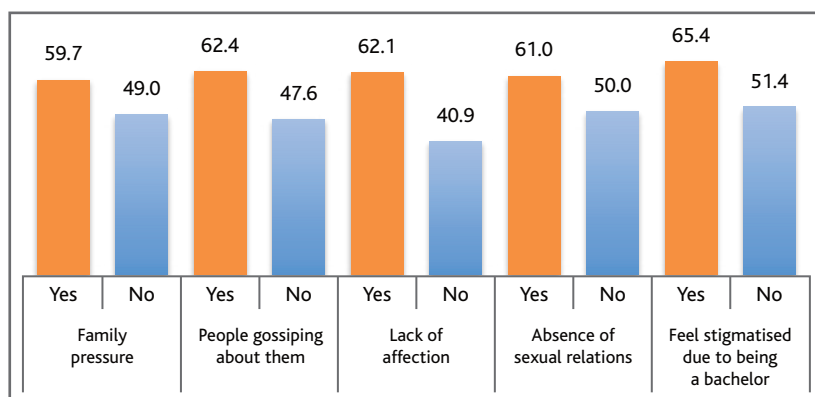
The pressure of the normative environment is also grounded in situations that are regarded as being the most difficult to bear due to the fact of being single, with eight out of ten bachelors (81.4%) citing family pressure and

8. Interview conducted in a rural part of Ankang in June 2015.

**Graph 2 – Proportion of never married men considering various situations as being among the most difficult to bear by reason of their bachelorhood (multiple choices, in %)**



**Graph 3 – Proportion of never married men declaring a poor quality of life depending on whether or not they feel resentment of various situations stemming from their bachelorhood**



two out of three (68.1%) gossip on the part of those around them. Like most other never married men interviewed, Daoming, 21 years of age, deplores the social stigmatisation attached to being single:

Not marrying is something I can't accept. (...) Uh, everyone in the countryside has to get married. Everyone must get married. If you don't get married, then you're on the outside, and the villagers will gossip about you. <sup>(9)</sup>

Nearly one out of every two never married men (45.1%) state that they are victims of ostracism due to their being single. As Yang Fan, 41 years of age, says:

It's not nice what the local people say. They insult people (...). No descendants, you know. (...) They say "bare sticks." (...) It's derogatory. (...) You can't struggle against them every day. (...) But they don't say it to your face. They do say it, but behind your back. <sup>(10)</sup>

The pressure of the normative environment also comes through in the responses of the never married men concerning the other most difficult

situations to bear on account of their status as singles. The fact that lack of affection and the absence of sexual relations and of children are cited by more than two thirds of them suggests that, without marriage, they are often deprived of them. This in turn underlines the strong normativity that surrounds love, sex, and family formation, which are always strongly circumscribed within the formal framework of heterosexual marriage. Indeed, although changes are underway in Chinese society, particularly with the development of people living together in a marital-type relationship, this remains a preparation for marriage (Yu and Xie 2015) that concerns only 4% of the never married men, mainly young ones, in our sample group.

The consequences of being single, as soon as they are felt negatively by never married men themselves, are all associated with a poorer quality of life. This is the case in particular with the social stigmatisation and gossip of which they are targets, which weigh heavily (a difference of around 15 percentage points), as it is with the strong family pressure to marry that is brought to bear especially on young people. <sup>(11)</sup> It is, however, the lack of affection, suggesting that bachelors find few alternatives to the emotional relations available within the context of marriage, that can most affect their quality of life (with a gap of 20 points between those who complain and the others). A corollary of this is the factor of the absence of sexual relations.

### ***Lack of sexual satisfaction, a factor of poor quality of life***

One element of the quality of life that has not been explored in the Chinese context is the frequency of intimate relations with partners and, more broadly, sexual satisfaction—presented as a determining factor of wellbeing felt in other populations (Abdoly and Pourmousavi 2013; Powdthavee and Wooden 2015). Taking these relations into account is, however, particularly relevant in any analysis of bachelorhood in rural areas. In fact, even if pre-marital sexual relations are increasingly frequent in Chinese society (Cao et al. 2011), change is slower in the countryside (He 2012), where a non-negligible portion of never married men engage in no sexual activity (Attané et al. 2013); marriage therefore remains the socially accepted frame of marital sex (Parish, Laumann and Mojola 2007; Yeung and Shu 2016). In our sample, sexual relations are indeed often closely associated with marriage, as Zhou Li, aged 45, explains:

In the countryside, this, well, basically, you could say [sexual relations can happen] after the parents have met, after they have decided these things, (...) when right away they might want to hold the wedding... <sup>(12)</sup>

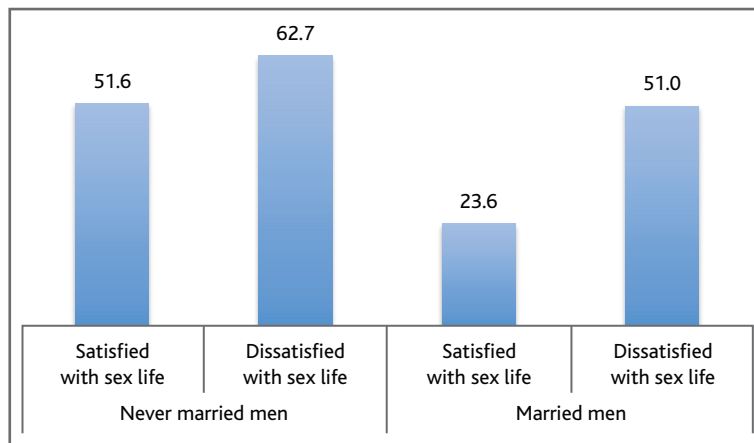
9. This respondent, from Ankang, was interviewed in June 2015 in Xi'an, where he was temporarily living.

10. Interview conducted in a rural part of Ankang in June 2015.

11. "85 Percent of Young Chinese Pressured by Family to Marry: Survey," *Xinhua News*, 21 December 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/21/c\\_136842753.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/21/c_136842753.htm) (accessed on 11 January 2018).

12. Interview conducted in a rural area of Ankang in June 2015.

**Graph 4 – Proportion of men who claim to have a poor quality of life by marital status and level of sexual satisfaction (in %)**



This is also borne out by Zheng Tong, who has, moreover, a very naturalistic view of male sexuality:

Man is a high-level animal. Marriage can satisfy a man's physical needs.<sup>(13)</sup>

Quality of life remains closely associated with sexual satisfaction in the men in our sample group, whatever their marital status, even if it is a more determinant factor among married men (Graph 4). The low level of sexual satisfaction of bachelors, *a fortiori* those encountering difficulties in marrying, underscores yet again the close association between sexuality and marriage.

Overall, never married men do have a much less active sexual life than their married counterparts: more than one in three has never had any sexual relations in his life and only one in ten had sex in the course of the month preceding the survey (Table 3). Moreover, during the course of their life they have had on average nearly one fewer sexual partner than the married men, and only for a quarter of them was this partner a girlfriend; they are also less active than married men in terms of homosexual relations, less than 5% of them having had at least one sexual relation with another man during their life (as against 7.8% of married men).

Many studies attest to the development of prostitution in China in recent decades (Jeffreys 2015; Parish, Laumann, and Mojola 2007), and some suggest in particular that recourse to this could, among bachelors, constitute a form of compensation for the absence of marital sex (Tucker et al. 2005). However, this is not the case within our sample group, where the never married do not have more frequent recourse than married men to paid sexual services (Table 4). Another point worth noting is the fact that hav-

ing recourse to this practice is not associated with a much better quality of life of the men concerned as compared to the others (Graph 5).

### ***Bachelorhood and poor quality of life: An unavoidable pairing?***

It is no surprise that quality of life deteriorates with a decline in health, the negative perception that men have of their economic situation in comparison to that of their peers, and the fact of not owning their own home, and it is inversely proportional to the number of relatives and friends likely to provide moral or financial support in the event of problems.<sup>(14)</sup> But the

**Table 4 – Quality of life factors associated with intimate relations with partners**

|                                                                                | Never married men                                       |                                                            | Married men<br>N=655 | Statistical tests |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
|                                                                                | Wishing to marry but encountering difficulties<br>N=375 | Wishing to marry but not encountering difficulties<br>N=59 |                      |                   |
| Never had a sex in their life (1) (in %)                                       | 46.8                                                    | 36.2                                                       | N0.0                 | (**/***)          |
| Average number of sexual partners in their life (1)                            | 1.2                                                     | 1.3                                                        | 2.0                  | (*/***)           |
| Last sexual relation within the previous month (1) (in %)                      | 11.2                                                    | 13.8                                                       | 77.3                 | (**/***)          |
| Have never had a girlfriend (in %)                                             | 48.9                                                    | 37.9                                                       | 0.0                  | (**/***)          |
| Have had at least one sexual relation with another man in their life (in %)    | 4.8                                                     | 3.4                                                        | 7.8                  | (NS/***)          |
| Have had recourse to paid sexual services during the past 12 months (2) (in %) | 14.9                                                    | 8.5                                                        | 15.5                 | (NS/NS)           |
| Dissatisfied with their sex life (in %)                                        | 58.3                                                    | 41.4                                                       | 15.6                 | (**/***)          |

Note: The statistical tests measure the significance of the disparities observed between the various groups of men, the highest level of significance being represented by three stars, NS indicating that the discrepancies are not significant. The first statistical tests compare the two groups of bachelors, the second compare those who are married and those who are bachelors.

Statistical significance: \*\*\*:  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*:  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*:  $p \leq 0.1$ ; not significant (NS):  $p > 0.1$ .

(1) These indicators take into account the full range of sexual relations (heterosexual and homosexual).

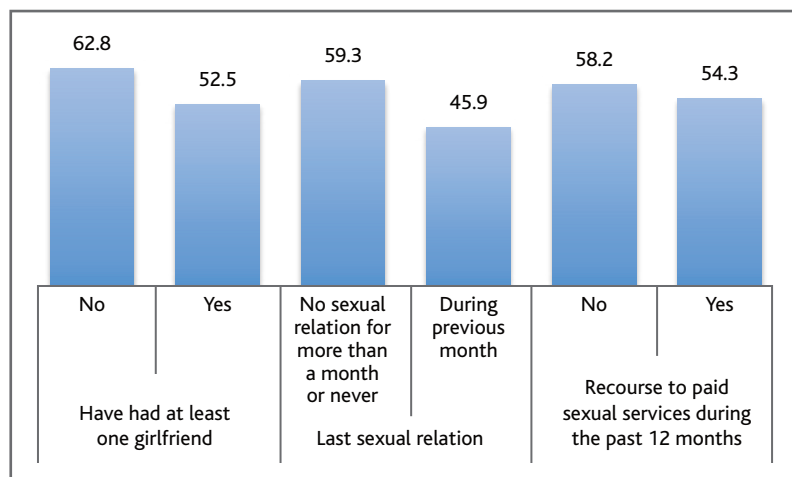
(2) Recourse to sexual services is defined as having had recourse to at least one of the following four practices over the past 12 months: sex in exchange for money, sex in exchange for presents, sex with a prostitute (either male or female), massaging of genital parts in a massage parlour.

Source: compilations by the authors (study DefiChine, <http://defichine.site.ined.fr/en/>)

13. Interview conducted in a rural area of Ankang in June 2015.

14. These relations were confirmed by a linear regression that is not presented here.

**Graph 5 – Proportion of never married men claiming to have a poor quality of life depending on the frequency of their love life or sex life (in %)**



fact of being married or not also marks a clear dichotomy between men in terms of quality of life, although it acts only as an additional factor that can improve or detract from the quality of life of a population that is already heavily selected from a socio-economic point of view: married men, who have thus fulfilled their normative desires in terms of conjugality, have a better quality of life than do other men, as they benefit from more favourable socio-economic conditions and as well as from more positive interactions with their social and family environment, including in their most intimate

relations. Thus, while marriage has a directly protective effect, bachelorhood entails a certain number of personal consequences contributing to a deterioration in the quality of life of a part of the population whose situation already makes for a lower quality of life; if poor quality of life is associated with economic difficulties, these are in fact presented by the great majority of bachelors as a significant impediment to finding a marriage partner. This "double trouble" of bachelorhood in rural areas is also accompanied by limited access to intimate relations with partners in an environment in which heterosexual marriage is seen as the exclusive norm and where sex remains, from a social perspective, closely associated with this form of union. This contributes further to a deterioration in the sexual satisfaction of never married men and, more broadly, in their quality of life, with poor access to marital sexual relations not being compensated for by increased recourse to paid sexual services.

While some never married men manage quite well (with four out of ten stating that they enjoy a good quality of life, cf. above), they remain nonetheless subject to the same constraints resulting from bachelorhood as the others, albeit in a less significant way (Table 5). To a certain extent, the negative effects of bachelorhood on the quality of life can hence be thought to be partially compensated for by increased income, a denser network of social relations, and a more active sex life, but also by reduced receptiveness to the family injunction to get married and to the social stigmatisation of bachelorhood. These factors enable people to relativise the

**Table 5 – Characteristics of never married men depending on the claimed level of quality of life**

|                                                                                         | Never married men                                |                                                  | Statistical tests |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
|                                                                                         | Claiming to have a good quality of life<br>N=221 | Claiming to have a poor quality of life<br>N=304 |                   |
| Median age                                                                              | 40.0                                             | 40.0                                             | (NS)              |
| Average income (1) (in yuan)                                                            | 14,070                                           | 11,978                                           | (***)             |
| Number of relatives or friends to count on in case of sickness, financial problem, etc. | 7.3                                              | 6.1                                              | (***)             |
| Wishing to marry but encountering difficulties in doing so (in %)                       | 64.9                                             | 76.0                                             | (***)             |
| Feel stigmatised due to being a bachelor (in %)                                         | 34.6                                             | 65.4                                             | (***)             |
| Consider family pressure to be one of the most difficult situations to bear (in %)      | 77.6                                             | 84.2                                             | (*)               |
| Average number of sexual partners in their life                                         | 1.3                                              | 1.1                                              | (NS)              |
| Last sexual relation within the previous month (in %)                                   | 14.8                                             | 9.2                                              | (*)               |
| Never had a girlfriend (in %)                                                           | 44.4                                             | 54.9                                             | (NS)              |
| Had recourse to paid sexual services during the previous 12 months (2) (in %)           | 14.2                                             | 12.5                                             | (NS)              |
| Dissatisfied with their sex life (in %)                                                 | 50.7                                             | 61.7                                             | (***)             |

Note: The statistical tests measure the significance of the disparities observed between the two groups of never married men, the highest level of significance being represented by three stars, NS indicating that the discrepancies are not significant.

Statistical significance: \*\*\*:  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*:  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*:  $p \leq 0.1$ ; not significant (NS):  $p > 0.1$ .

(1) The average annual income is estimated here as being after conversion of a category-specific variable into a numerical one. It should therefore not be analysed as such, but only as an illustration of the differences between the various groups.

(2) Recourse to sexual services is defined as having had recourse to at least one of the following four practices over the past 12 months: sex in exchange for money, sex in exchange for presents, sex with a prostitute (either male or female), massaging of genital parts in a massage parlour.

Source: compilations by the authors (study DefiChine, <http://defichine.site.ined.fr/en/>)

fatalism that presides over most research carried out on bachelorhood in rural China (Jin et al. 2013; Liu et al. 2014). What remains to be determined are the other factors (such as professional fulfilment or leisure activities), not taken up in our study, that are likely to influence, in one way or another, the quality of life of men who do not have access to marriage.

■ Translated by Peter Brown.

■ Isabelle Attané is Director of Research at the Institut national d'études démographiques (French National Institute for Demographic Studies).  
INED, 133 boulevard Davout, 75020, Paris, France (attane@ined.fr).

■ Xueyan Yang is a Professor in the School of Public Policy and Administration, Xi'an Jiaotong University.  
Institute for Population and Development Studies, School of Public Policy and Administration, Xi'an Jiaotong University, #28, Xianning Xi Road, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province 710049, P. R. of China (xueyan yang@mail.xjtu.edu.cn).

Article received on 4 August 2017. Accepted on 29 January 2018.

## References

- ABBOTT, Pamela, and Claire WALLACE. 2012. "Social Quality: A Way to Measure the Quality of Society." *Social Indicators Research* 108(1): 153-167.
- ABBOTT, Pamela, Claire WALLACE, Ka LIN, and Christian HAERPFER. 2016. "The Quality of Society and Life Satisfaction in China." *Social Indicators Research* 127(2): 653-670.
- ABDALLAH, Saamah, and Laura STOLL. 2012. "Review of Individual-level Drivers of Subjective Wellbeing." *Analysis, Implementation and Dissemination of Wellbeing Indicators*. Eurostat.
- ABDOLY, Mehdi, and L. POURMOUSAVI. 2013. "The Relationship Between Sexual Satisfaction and Education Levels in Women." *International Journal of Women's Health and Reproduction Science* 1(2): 39-44.
- APPLETON, Simon, and Lina SONG. 2008. "Life Satisfaction in Urban China: Components and Determinants." *World Development* 36(11): 2325-40.
- ATTANÉ, Isabelle. 2013. *The Demographic Masculinization of China. Hoping for a Son*. Heidelberg: Springer.
- ATTANÉ, Isabelle, Qunlin ZHANG, Shuzhuo LI, Xueyan YANG, and Q. GUILMOTO. 2013. "Bachelorhood and Sexuality in a Context of Female Dearth: Evidence from a Survey in Rural Anhui, China." *The China Quarterly* 215: 703-726.
- BROCKMANN, Hilke, Jan DELHEY, Christian WELZEL, and Hao YUAN. 2009. "The China Puzzle: Falling Happiness in a Rising Economy." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 10(4): 387-405.
- Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. 2013. *2012 China Households Happiness Survey Report*. Beijing: Institute of Population and Labor Economics of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
- CAO Yuan 曹远, WANG Yu 王瑜, HE Qiya 何启亚, WANG Zhaoguan 王召乾, FENG Weiping 冯维平, JI Jinhua 吉金花, and LIAO Susu 廖苏苏. 2011. "海南省乡镇地区校外青年婚前性行为及其与流动经历关系的研究" (*Hainan sheng xiangzhen diqu xiaowai qingnian hunqian xingxingwei ji qi yu liudong jingli guanxi de yanjiu*, Relationship between gender, experience of migration and premarital sex among out-of-school youths in rural Hainan, China). *中华流行病学杂志 (Zhonghua liu xing bing xue zazhi)* 32(11): 1095-100.
- CCMS. 2014. *2014中国人婚恋状况调查报告* (2014 Zhongguo ren hunlian zhuangkuang diaocha baogao, Chinese marriage status survey 2014). In "2015年中国人婚恋状况调查报告: 女博士才是恋爱达人" (2015 nian zhongguo ren hunlian zhuangkuang diaocha baogao: nü boshi cai shi lian'ai da ren, Chinese marriage status survey 2015), *People's Daily Online*, 11 January 2016, <http://edu.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0111/c1053-28037494-2.html> (accessed on 29 January 2018).
- CHEN, Juan, Deborah S.DAVIS, Kaming WU, and Haijing DAI. 2015. "Life Satisfaction in Urbanizing China: The Effect of City Size and Pathways to Urban Residency." *Cities* 49: 88-97.
- CHENG, Zhiming, Stephen P. KING, Russell SMYTH, and Haining WANG. 2016. "Housing Property Rights and Subjective Wellbeing in Urban China." *European Journal of Political Economy* 45(Supplement): 160-174.
- COLIN, Sébastien. 2013. "Le défi rural du 'rêve chinois'" (The rural challenge of the 'Chinese dream'). *Hérodote* 3(150): 9-26.
- DAS GUPTA, Monica, Avraham EBENSTEIN and Ethan SHARYGIN. 2013. "Implications of China's future Bride Dearth for the Geographical Distribution and Social Protection Needs of Never-married Men." *Population Studies* 67(1): 39-59.
- EASTERLIN, Richard, Robson MORGAN, Malgorzata SWITEK, and Fei WANG. 2012. "China's Life Satisfaction, 1990-2010." *PNAS* 109(25): 9775-9780.
- EKLUND, Lisa, and Isabelle ATTANÉ. 2017. "Marriage Squeeze and Mate Selection." In Xiaowei Zang (ed.), *Handbook on Marriage and the Family in China*. London: Sage.
- HE, Lei. 2012. "Premarital Sex Among Never Married Young Adults in Contemporary China: Comparisons Between Males and Females." *PAA Conference*. <http://paa2012.princeton.edu/papers/120292> (accessed on 12 January 2018).
- HELLIWELL, John, Richard LAYARDET, and Jeffrey SACHS (eds.). 2013. *World Happiness Report 2013*. New York: UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
- JANKOWIAK, William R. 1989. "Sex Differences in Mate Selection and Sexuality in the People's Republic of China." *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 22: 63-83.
- JEFFREYS, Elaine. 2015. *Sex in China*. Cambridge: Polity, China Today Series.
- JIN, Xiaoyi, Lige LIU, Yan LI, Marcus W. FELDMAN, and Shuzhuo LI. 2013. "'Bare Branches' and the Marriage Market in Rural China: Preliminary Evidence from a village-level survey." *Chinese Sociological Review* 46(1): 83-104.
- JIN, Li, Shuzhuo LI, and Marcus W. FELDMAN. 2006. "Marriage Form and Fertility in Rural China: An Investigation in Three Counties." *Population Research and Policy Review* 25(2): 141-156.
- KLEMENC-KETIS, Zalika, Mateja SMOGAVEC, Nina SOFTIC, and Janko KERSNIK. 2011. "Health-related Quality of Life: A Population Based Study from Slovenia." *European Journal Public Health* 19(1): 7-12.
- KNIGHT, John, Lina SONG, and Ramani GUNATILAKA. "Subjective Wellbeing and its Determinants in Rural China." *China Economic Review* 20(4): 635-649.
- LI Peng and Shunfeng SONG. 2012. "Why are Housing Prices so High in Urban China?." *The Journal of China and Global Economics* 1(1): 39-42.

- LI, Shuzhuo, Qunlin ZHANG, Xueyan YANG, and Isabelle ATTANÉ. 2010. "Male Singlehood, Poverty and Sexuality in Rural China: An Exploratory Survey." *Population-E* 65(4): 679-694.
- LIU, Lige, Xiaoyi JIN, Melissa J. BROWN, and Marcus W. FELDMAN. 2014. "Involuntary Bachelorhood in Rural China: A Social Network Perspective." *Population-E* 69 (1): 103-126.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Better Life Index (general website page) <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/life-satisfaction/>; <https://www.oecd.org/statistics/Guidelines%20on%20Measuring%20Subjective%20Wellbeing.pdf> (accessed on 29 July 2017).
- PARISH, William L., Edward O. LAUMANN, and Sanyu A. MOJOLA. 2007. "Sexual Behaviours in China: Trends and Comparisons." *Population and Development Review* 33(4): 729-756.
- Population Census Office and National Bureau of Statistics of China. 2012. 中国 2010 年人口普查资料 (Zhongguo 2010 nian renkou pucha ziliao, Tabulation on the 2010 population census of the People's Republic of China). Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe.
- POWDTHAVEE, Nattavudh, and Mark WOODEN. 2015. "Life Satisfaction and Sexual Minorities: Evidence from Australia and the United Kingdom." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 116: 107-126.
- Shaanxi Provincial Bureau of Statistics. 2011. *Shaanxi tongji nianjian*. Provincial office of statistics, Shaanxi. China Statistics Press.
- SMYTH, Russel, and Xiaolei QIAN. 2008. "Inequality and Happiness in Urban China." *Economics Bulletin* 4(23): 1-10.
- TUCKER, Joseph D., Gail E. HENDERSON, Tian F. WANG, Ying Y. HUANG, William PARISH, Suiming PAN, Xiang S. CHEN, and Myron S. COHEN. 2005. "Surplus Men, Sex Work, and the Spread of HIV in China." *AIDS* 19: 539-547.
- VEENHOVEN, R. 1996. "The Study of Life Satisfaction." In Willem E. Saris, R. Veenhoven, A.C. Scherpenzeel and B. Bunting (eds.), *A Comparative Study of Satisfaction with Life in Europe*. Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University Press. 11-48.
- WATSON, Dorothy, Florian PICHLER, and Claire WALLACE. 2010. *Subjective Well-being in Europe*. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.
- WEI, Yan, and Zhang LI. 2015. "Involuntary Bachelorhood in Rural China." *China Report* 51(1): 1-22.
- WEI Yan 韦艳 and ZHANG Li 张力. 2011. "农村大龄未婚男性的婚姻困境: 基于性别不平等视角的认识" (*Nongcun daling weihun nanxing de hunyin kunjing: jiyu xingbie bupingdeng shijiao de renshi*, The marriage dilemma of involuntary bachelors in rural China: from the perspective of gender inequality). *人口研究 (Renkou yanjiu, Population research)* 35(5): 58-70.
- WEI, Shang-Jin, Xiaobo ZHANG, and Yin LIU Yin. 2012. "Status Competition and Housing Prices." *NBER Working Paper* No. 18000. NBER, Cambridge, MA.
- YANG, Xueyan, Shuzhuo LI, Isabelle ATTANÉ, and Marcus W. FELDMAN. 2017. "On the Relationship Between the Marriage Squeeze and the Quality of Life of Rural Men in China." *American Journal of Men's Health* 11(3): 702-710.
- YEUNG, W.J. and Hu SHU. 2016. "Paradox in Marriage Values and Behavior in Contemporary China." *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 2(3): 447-476.
- YU, Jia and Yu XIE. 2015. "Cohabitation in China: Trends and Determinants." *Population and Development Review* 41(4): 607-628.
- ZARAFONETIS, Nicole. 2017. *Sexuality in a Changing China: Young Women, Sex and Intimate Relations in the Reform Period*. London: Routledge.
- ZHANG, Chengsi, Guojun AN, and Xin YU. 2012. "What Drives China's House Prices: Marriage or Money?" *China & World Economy* 20(4): 19-36.
- ZHOU, Jie and Yu XIE. 2016. "Does Economic Development Affect Life Satisfaction? A Spatial-Temporal Contextual Analysis in China." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 17(2): 643-658.
- ZHOU, Xudong, and Therese HESKETH. 2017. "High Sex Ratios in Rural China: Declining Well-being with Age in Never-married Men." *Philosophical Transactions of Royal Society*. <http://rstb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/372/1729/20160324> (accessed 28 on September 2017).