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# Bachelorhood and Sexuality in a Context of Female Shortage: Evidence from a Survey in Rural Anhui, China

Isabelle Attané<sup>\*</sup>, Zhang Qunlin<sup>†</sup>, Li Shuzhuo<sup>‡</sup>, Yang Xueyan<sup>§</sup> and Christophe Z. Guilmoto<sup>\*\*</sup>

## Abstract

Traditionally, marriage is a near universality in China. However, in the coming decades, owing to the growing sex imbalance, millions of men will be unable to marry. As a consequence, bachelorhood is becoming a new demographic concern, particularly affecting men from the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups. In China's cultural context today, heterosexual marriage remains a prerequisite for family formation and, in rural society particularly, the legitimate setting for sexual activity. Under such circumstances, bachelorhood is likely to produce privations on various fronts, the consequences of which for both the individual and the community are still largely unknown. This article focuses on the opinions and sexual behaviour of bachelors, and highlights significant variations from those of married men. It is based on the findings of an exploratory survey conducted in 2008 in selected villages in a rural county in Anhui province, referred to here as JC county. The survey provides insights into the more general situation of rural men unable to marry in a context of female shortage, and indicates the conditions a growing number of Chinese men will face in the near future.

**Keywords:** Rural China; women shortage; bachelorhood; marriage; sexual behaviour; poverty

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Traditionally, marriage is a universal norm in China.<sup>1</sup> However, from the early 2010s, owing to an increasing shortage of females, millions of men will be unable

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1 Blayo 1997.

to marry.<sup>2</sup> This is not a new phenomenon but an increasingly critical one. The mismatched sizes of male and female cohorts now reaching marriageable age and the demographic manifestation of socio-cultural and behavioural discriminatory practices against women at various stages of their life have led to China becoming one of the world's most sex-imbalanced countries.<sup>3</sup> This new demographic of single males is a growing concern. The cultural context of China today still dictates that heterosexual marriage remains, in most cases, a prerequisite for marital-type cohabitation and family formation and, in rural society particularly, the legitimate setting for sexual relations. This creates a *de facto* dichotomy between married people and bachelors in that the private lives of men who cannot marry may differ greatly from those who do marry. Ultimately, bachelorhood, coupled with the resulting impossibility of forming a family and having legitimate sex within marriage, may produce frustrations on various fronts, the consequences of which – for both individuals and the community – are still largely unknown.

This article focuses on the opinions and sexual practices of unmarried men with the aim of highlighting any behavioural differences between bachelors and married men. It provides a descriptive analysis based on an exploratory survey<sup>4</sup> conducted in 2008 in selected villages in rural Anhui. This case study is not intended to infer the situation elsewhere. However, it does yield insights into the more general situation of rural bachelors in a specific context of gender imbalance in the marriage market, and more widely on the sexual market.<sup>5</sup>

### Unmarried Men: A New Demographic Concern

In China today heterosexual marriage remains the prerequisite for marital-type cohabitation and family formation. Most young Chinese are of the belief that once they reach adulthood, heterosexual marriage is inevitable and that there is no alternative.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, social norms still strongly influence behaviours and very few Chinese, especially in rural areas, choose to remain unmarried. In 2010, only 5 per cent of males and 1.2 per cent of females aged 30 had never been married; at the age of 50, these percentages were 3.3 and 0.3, respectively. Whilst almost all women were married at the age of 30, irrespective of their educational level (Figure 1a), the situation was rather different for men (Figure 1b). Marriage was a near universality for all except those with no schooling (2.3 million, which represents 5 per cent of the male population aged 15 or over in 2000): more than one third of males with no schooling (37 per cent)

2 Li, Shuzhuo et al. 2006, 389.

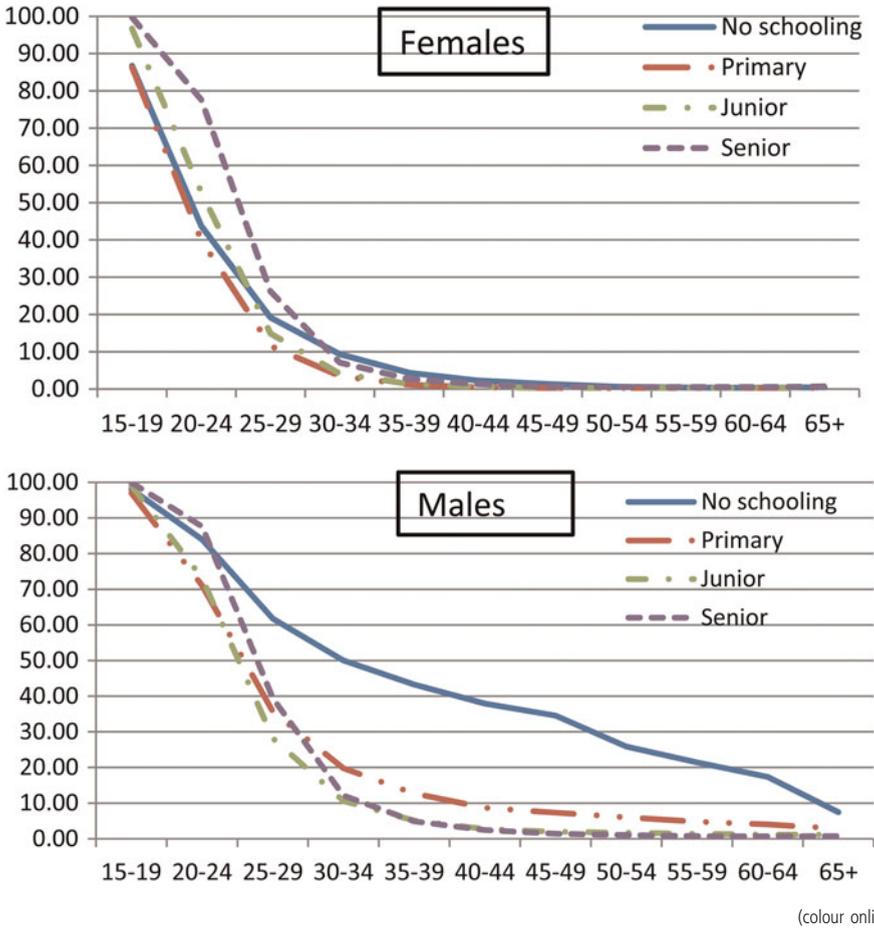
3 Attané 2013.

4 Supported by Programs for Changjiang Scholars and Innovative Research Team (IRT0855), Ministry of Education of China, and by INED-Paris, and done in collaboration with the IPDS and School of Public Policy and Administration, Xi'an Jiaotong University, China.

5 "Sexual market" refers here to the adult population assumed to be potentially sexually active. The concept of sexual market is also defined by Collins 1974.

6 Evans 1997, 114.

Figure 1a and 1b: **Never-married Population by Age and Level of Education in 2010 (%)**



were still unmarried at the age of 30 (compared with 9.9 per cent of all others); aged 50, it was 20 per cent (compared with 3 per cent of educated males).

The comparatively high prevalence of bachelorhood among men with no schooling is a result of the combined effect of a longstanding male marriage squeeze in China (in the 1982 census, 94.3 per cent of single people aged 40 or above were males<sup>7</sup>) and the practice of female hypergamy, as women tend to select spouses from better socio-economic backgrounds,<sup>8</sup> leaving the poorest men more frequently excluded from marriage.<sup>9</sup>

There has long been a sex imbalance in China's population. In the past, this atypical demographic characteristic resulted from high rates of female mortality,

7 PCO 1985, 479.

8 Greenhalgh and Winkler 2005, 274.

9 Li, Shuzhuo et al. 2010.

especially at young ages and in the reproductive period, in a society based on patrilineal values which maintained women in a secondary position.<sup>10</sup> However, from the 1980s onwards, following the enforcement of birth-control policies and despite modernization, China has registered an increasingly skewed sex ratio<sup>11</sup> to the point that it is now, after India (106.4 males per 100 females, according to its 2011 Census), the country with the highest ratio of men to women: 104.9 per 100 females in 2010,<sup>12</sup> while the world average that year (China and India excluded) was 98.5.<sup>13</sup> In 2000, the gender imbalance among China's never-married population reached new highs: of those aged 25–29, 74.2 per cent were men; of those aged 30 above, 90.6 per cent were men.<sup>14</sup>

The current sex imbalance in the marriage market – and more widely on the sexual market – is due partly, through the process of fertility decline, to the mismatched sizes of male and female birth cohorts from the 1970s onwards now reaching marriageable age, allowing for the age gap between spouses. It has been further exacerbated by discrimination against girls throughout the 1980s through sex-selective abortions and neglect after birth, leaving the younger age groups with a pronounced male surplus.<sup>15</sup> While adjustments like a widening spousal age gap or an increase in remarriage among widowed and divorced women may alleviate this imbalance, a significant number of men may remain excluded from marriage: the sex ratio among people aged 15–49 is expected to reach around 117–120 men per 100 women in 2050.<sup>16</sup> China's population will have to find ways of adjusting to this new demographic concern which will be a defining feature of the coming decades. The male surplus will have ramifications far beyond the narrow bounds of population counting, which, however, cannot be accurately foretold as this is a unique and large-scale situation never experienced in the past; even if they increase no further, the highly skewed sex ratios of today will have a major impact on China's culture and society.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Bare Branches: A Specific Subject for Research**

As stated above, a prolonged or even permanent state of being unmarried is – and will remain – largely a male characteristic in China.<sup>18</sup> As mentioned above, the marriage market is impacted by hypergamy as women exercise their preference for a spouse with a higher socio-economic status. As a result, there is a higher number of bachelors among poorer and less-educated males<sup>19</sup> whose chances

10 Greenhalgh 2008, 268.

11 Tuljapurkar, Li and Feldman 1995, 875.

12 PCO 2012.

13 WPP. 2010. "World population prospects, the 2010 revision," [http://esa.un.org/wpp/unpp/panel\\_population.htm](http://esa.un.org/wpp/unpp/panel_population.htm). Accessed 5 October 2011.

14 PCO 2002.

15 Attané 2013.

16 Attané 2006.

17 Greenhalgh and Winkler 2005, 276.

18 Pco 2002, 1619.

19 Greenhalgh and Winkler 2005, 274.

of marrying may be further compromised by an inability to meet the rising costs of marriage – including bride price<sup>20</sup> and the costs of the ceremony itself.<sup>21</sup> This group of involuntary bachelors has been termed the “bare branches” (*guanggun'er* 光棍儿) – an expression applied to men who, being unable to marry, are unable to form a family since growing new branches on the family tree is impossible without marriage, according to prevailing social and familial norms.<sup>22</sup>

In rural society in particular, marriage is the prerequisite for legitimate sexual activity,<sup>23</sup> which is itself set in a social and cultural context shaped by ancient Daoist and Confucian traditions, but still strongly marked by the enforced social control of three decades of communism.<sup>24</sup> Contemporary Chinese society leaves almost no alternative to heterosexual marriage.<sup>25</sup> Non-marital cohabitation is still rare and in most cases only a preliminary to marriage, and bachelorhood is still looked down upon. In many aspects, Chinese society remains deeply imbued with Confucian traditions which set great store by the continuation of the family line and filial piety.<sup>26</sup> Marriage and parenthood are essential to both and are therefore generally considered to be required stages in an individual's life. According to Evans: “The conflation of sexual relations and marriage is reinforced by the naturalized view of marriage as the inevitable culmination of [...] early adulthood.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, marriage not only remains a means of perpetuating patrilineal traditions, especially through ancestor worship,<sup>28</sup> but also allows new kinship ties to be formed which help to build social and economic networks.<sup>29</sup>

This exploratory survey addresses the issue of bachelorhood by considering that, when not chosen, it is likely to impact life plans. Our founding research assumption is, therefore, that in the social and cultural context of China's rural society, which puts a premium on marriage and parenthood,<sup>30</sup> there exists a dichotomy between married and unmarried people, with the latter having restricted access to the social benefits associated with marriage. Being unable to marry and father children is no trivial matter: it may produce frustrations and privations on many fronts (sexual, emotional, lack of social recognition, etc.), the consequences of which for both individuals and the community are

20 The Chinese cultural tradition of a bride price in exchange for permission to marry still continues (Anderson 2007). The groom's parents give money and/or gifts to the bride's parents as compensation for rearing costs and the loss of rights over their daughter. A further consideration, particularly since the agricultural de-collectivization which allowed families to profit from the sale of surplus production, is the loss of a bride's workforce (Brown 2003). The social liberalization brought on by economic reforms has seen a sharp rise in the bride price, thereby adding to the commercial transaction aspect of marriage.

21 Wei and Zhang 2009, 20.

22 Tucker et al. 2005, 540.

23 McMillan 2006, 33.

24 Honig 2003, 143.

25 Sigley 2006, 51; Jeffreys 2006, 5; Li, Yinhe 2008, 206.

26 Yuen, Law and Ho 2004, 37.

27 Evans 1997, 114.

28 Liu 2005, 18–20.

29 Johnson 1992.

30 Li, Shuzhuo and Jin 2006.

still largely unknown. Some studies have attempted to predict the possible consequences of large-scale bachelorhood on society as a whole;<sup>31</sup> however, to our knowledge, no research has yet been devoted to the personal situation of bachelors in China's rural areas where traditional social values are still very much present, and to the impact of involuntary bachelorhood on the men themselves. The "Survey on family life and reproductive health of the unmarried men in rural China" (*Zhongguo nongcun nanxing shengzhi jiankang he jiating shenghuo diaocha* 中国农村男性生殖健康和家庭生活调查), conducted in 2008 in a rural county of Anhui (hereafter called JC county), attempted to address this void by asking several questions: how does bachelorhood affect a man's life and his life plans? Considering that premarital sex, although increasingly common,<sup>32</sup> is still socially stigmatized,<sup>33</sup> is bachelorhood likely to impact sexual activity? Does the sexuality of bachelors differ from that of married men? Do unmarried men display specific socio-economic characteristics?

### Methodology and Limits of the Survey

The need for an exploratory study on bachelors in rural China proved obvious in the context of such a large-scale (tens of millions of people will be affected by involuntary bachelorhood)<sup>34</sup> and potentially longstanding impact (the sex imbalance in the marriage market is likely to be felt at least until around 2030).<sup>35</sup> This survey attempts to serve a dual purpose: to explore bachelors' opinions and practices in a context of significant social control, and to learn about their sexual behaviour in a context of a male surplus. As in many other countries, particularly in the developing world, contact with the population could only be made with the agreement and cooperation of the local authorities. The questionnaires were handed out by employees of the local family planning bureau. They were trained and supervised by researchers from the Institute for Population and Development Studies (IPDS), who were present throughout the data collection operations. However, as far as we could tell from the results, which are consistent with those from other existing surveys,<sup>36</sup> the presence of the local authorities did not impair data collection or affect the quality of answers.

The sample was selected randomly (cluster sampling method) from the family planning registers in villages attached administratively to JC county. The county was divided into three zones from which six townships or villages were selected, two in each zone. Four administrative villages were then randomly selected in each of these townships or villages, i.e. a total of 24 villages. Finally, 15 single

31 See Hudson and den Boer 2004; Poston and Glover 2005; Eberstadt 2000.

32 Yan 2003.

33 McMillan 2006.

34 Li, Shuzhuo and Jin 2006

35 Attané 2006.

36 Pan et al. 2004; Chinese Health and Family Life Survey 2000, <http://popcenter.uchicago.edu/data/chfls.shtml>. Accessed 21 May 2013.

men were chosen in each village in order to obtain five men in each of the three age groups (28–34, 35–44, and 45 and above) in such a way that a total of 360 single men aged 28 years or above were selected initially. However, when a total of five men by age group could not be reached, the remainder were drawn from the age group immediately below. In some cases, the selection was extended to men aged 27 years and to villages in a neighbouring township. In total, the sample was selected from seven townships and villages. As the survey was designed to study the characteristics of single men, they were intentionally overrepresented: a ratio of 3:2 was applied to select the sample of married men from single men. In total, 665 men were approached. During the process, 38 of them withdrew (a drop-out rate of 5.7 per cent), and six questionnaires (0.9 per cent) were filled out too quickly (in less than 20 minutes) and were withdrawn. This left a total of 621 usable questionnaires (93.4 per cent of the initial sample), of which 41.5 per cent (258) were filled out by married men, and 58.5 per cent (363) by single men. Finally, as the age of 30 was considered as the threshold for rural males to get married,<sup>37</sup> only questionnaires completed by males aged 30 or above were considered for the present analysis, i.e. 288 never-married and 235 married men, with a total sample of 523 males. As they were by definition absent from the county at the time of the survey, male migrants were excluded from the sample. This decision was supported by the argument that migration is likely to influence behaviour.<sup>38</sup>

To guarantee anonymity to respondents and allow them to respond freely, the CAPI (Computer-assisted personal interviewing) method was used. An interviewer was present to give technical assistance to the respondent when necessary, but was seated in front of the respondent and unable to see the computer screen. Before starting the process, an interviewer read to each respondent the regulations concerning privacy protection, and informed him of the possibility to withdraw at any time. When the respondent was illiterate (38 respondents) or had a low education level, the interviewer read out the questions and explained only how to input an answer. Each respondent was allocated 45 to 60 minutes to answer the questionnaire.

This survey was primarily designed to identify new research issues and to pave the way for further data collection operations. However, it has also generated original information that can be used for a descriptive analysis. In addition, in spite of its limited sample size, it has provided preliminary answers to our major research questions. While the results of this case study are not intended to be generalized or applied to situations elsewhere, they undoubtedly shed new light on the situation of bachelors in China's rural areas.

### **Bachelors' Characteristics in JC County**

JC county is located in Anhui province. It was selected for the survey for two major reasons: first, the traditional patriarchal system, Confucian culture and

37 Wei, Jin and Li 2008; Das Gupta, Ebenstein and Sharygin 2010.

38 Wu, Haixia et al. 2007.

son preference still prevail in this area, as in many parts of China; and second, the county appears to be representative of rural China's social and demographic situation.

In 2000, JC county had fewer than 800,000 inhabitants, with an overall sex ratio of 103.9 males per 100 females. Two-thirds of the population (66.1 per cent) were working in agriculture, and the average annual income of peasants was around 4,000 yuan. Sex ratios for children under 5 were very skewed: 118.9 boys per 100 girls (against 120.2 nationally in 2000), or about 15 per cent above the levels usually expected.<sup>39</sup> A male surplus was also observed in the never-married population aged 27 or above, of which 63.9 per cent were men in 2008. Of the total sample of married men (N = 258), 63.6 per cent said that there was at least one single man aged 27 or above among their contact circle (i.e. family, friends, neighbours, relatives, etc.), suggesting that prolonged or permanent bachelorhood is not a residual phenomenon in the selected villages. It is noteworthy that the marriage market in JC county is characterized by a high propensity to endogamy: 82.2 per cent of the married men questioned (N = 258) had married a woman from the same county, and one in three had married a woman from the same village. The mean age at first marriage of married men questioned (N = 258) was 25.1 years at the time of the survey, slightly below the national average (25.7 years in 2000). There is no significant difference in the age composition of the two groups – the mean age of bachelors being 39.8 years (40.9 years for married men). In most respects, JC county provides a relevant case through which to explore the opinions and practices of bachelors in a context of a male marriage squeeze.

### **Bachelorhood versus Marriage: A Social Dichotomization**

As stated above, our founding research assumption is that in a rural Chinese social and cultural context, people who have access to marriage – which permits them to have legitimate sex, cohabit with a partner and eventually have one or more children – and those who do not – i.e. the bachelors for whom sexual activity and forming a family are considered as socially unacceptable – form two distinct groups with specific behaviours and characteristics.

The results suggest that this assumption is valid. Bachelorhood has an immediate impact on living arrangements: whilst the vast majority of married men (86.8 per cent, with no significant difference by age group) logically live with their wives and/or offspring (see [Table 1](#)), half of all never-married men live with one or two parents (45.8 per cent) or with sibling(s) (4.2 per cent). This is especially so for those in the lower age group. Also, while only a very small percentage of married men live alone (usually those whose spouses have migrated), a significant portion of never-married men live by themselves (41.3 per cent), and

39 Clarke 2000, 24.

Table 1: Living Arrangements by Marital Status and Age Group (%), JC County, 2008

Age group	Never-married			Married		
	30–39 (n = 128)	40 + (n = 160)	Total (n = 288)	30–39 (n = 101)	40 + (n = 134)	Total (n = 235)
<b>Living arrangements</b>						
Alone	25.0	54.4	41.3	2.0	6.7	4.7
With parent(s)	60.9	33.8	45.8	8.9	4.5	6.4
With sibling(s)	3.9	4.4	4.2	0.0	0.8	0.4
With spouse/ cohabitant and/ or (a) child(ren) (and eventually other relatives)	2.3	1.9	2.1	86.1	87.3	86.8
Other	7.8	5.6	6.6	3.0	0.8	1.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Chi2	27.625***			7.633 ns		
	464.596***					

Note:

Statistical significance:  $p \leq 0.01$ \*\*\*;  $p \leq 0.05$ \*\*;  $p \leq 0.1$ \*;  $p > 0.1$  ns.

this is especially the case for older men. It is noteworthy that only four never-married men (1.4 per cent) reported living with a regular partner, and another two (0.7 per cent) reported living with a child/children,<sup>40</sup> and so have found at least a temporary alternative to marriage for forming a family.

The survey indicates that never-married men are of the opinion that their bachelorhood status would certainly be long term, and most of them consider that they have little chance of marrying: 71.6 per cent of the total sample (i.e. aged 27+, with  $N = 363$ ) believe that it is more difficult for a rural man to marry after the age of 30, and only 15.4 per cent (but mainly the youngest at 21.2 per cent) expect to marry within a year. This supports our decision, stated above, to consider 30 as the age after which the chances of marriage decrease significantly in rural China.

These results sketch out several important bachelor characteristics in JC county. As there is little inclination for non-marital cohabitation, the never-married status is valid when defining the absence of marital-type unions, and consequently underlies the absence of any alternative to marriage for family formation. Another observation is that even if two in five bachelors live on their own – a much higher percentage than the national average, which was less than 2 per cent in rural areas in 2000<sup>41</sup> – one in two (50 per cent) then live with a

40 It was also not specified whether the child was theirs or belonging to a former spouse of their partner.

41 PCO 2002, 644.

parent(s) and/or siblings. This indicates that most bachelors have little privacy in their daily life, and this will obviously have an effect on their sexual activity.

Another commonality among bachelors is their low social and economic status. Such a status, especially in rural or peasant communities, is a consistent determinant of bachelorhood<sup>42</sup> as women tend to choose spouses who can provide them with better living conditions. According to Evans, “Failure to marry is still widely seen as evidence of impoverishment.”<sup>43</sup> This link is confirmed in our sample in which married and never-married men form two distinct groups (see [Table 2](#)). Never-married men have much less advantageous socio-economic characteristics, as many more fall into the lower income group: 79.2 per cent earned less than 1,000 yuan per month in the six months preceding the survey, against 51.9 per cent of the married men. Furthermore – and this is a plausible explanation for their lower economic status – never-married men are predominantly engaged in agriculture only, while a slightly higher number of married men combine agriculture with complementary activities.

Our research shows that never-married men are in general much less educated than married men: 11.8 per cent are illiterate (against 1.3 per cent of married men), and just over half have not received an education beyond primary school. On average, married men have two years more education than never-married men. Never-married men aged 40 or above are by far the least educated: on average, they have less than six years of formal education, which is four years less than the married men in the same age group. The differential by marital status is also found among the youngest respondents, but is much narrower as a consequence of the improvements in overall education levels among children over the past few decades. Whatever else, these data confirm national findings that prolonged or permanent bachelorhood is far more widespread among men in the lowest socio-economic classes, i.e. with lower incomes and education levels. This is in line with other studies that show that rural bachelorhood is generally associated with poverty.<sup>44</sup>

### **On Bachelorhood, Life Plans and Self-Perceptions**

The shared characteristics of bachelors in JC county confirm that a low socio-economic status is a crucial determinant of bachelorhood. Poverty and to a much lesser extent a low education level are indeed seen by a significant number of men as the reasons behind their unmarried status. [Table 3](#) shows that the older bachelors are more likely to blame poverty for their lack of marriage prospects, although this is unquestionably related to their own specific circumstances. A shortage of women in the contact circle, as reported by one in four bachelors (26.7 per cent), is another impediment to marriage. Given this, and considering

42 Bourdieu 1989; Pagès 2001.

43 Evans 1997, 169.

44 Bourdieu 1989.

Table 2: Income and Education Level by Marital Status and Age Group (%), JC County, 2008

Age group	Never-married			Married		
	30–39 (n = 128)	40 + (n = 160)	Total (n = 288)	30–39 (n = 101)	40 + (n = 134)	Total (n = 235)
<b>Income</b>						
<1,000 yuan	64.1	91.2	79.2	35.6	64.2	51.9
≥1,000 yuan	35.9	8.8	20.8	64.4	35.8	48.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Chi2	32.631***			19.026***		
	43.733***					
Mean monthly income (yuan)	841.8	450.0	624.1	1190.6	923.5	1038.3
t-Statistic	6.886***			3.328***		
	8.315***					
<b>Education</b>						
No education and primary school	39.8	70.0	56.6	14.9	14.9	14.9
Junior secondary school and above	60.2	30.0	43.4	85.1	85.1	85.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Chi2	26.620***			0.0002 ns		
	101.854***					
Average education duration (in years)	8.2	5.8	6.9	9.6	9.5	9.6
t-Statistic	6.602***			0.3558 ns		
	10.621***					
<b>Employment</b>						
Only agriculture	13.3	28.1	21.5	2.0	8.2	5.5
Agriculture and complementary activities	69.5	58.8	63.5	73.3	63.4	67.7
Other	17.2	13.1	15.0	24.7	28.4	26.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Chi2	9.711**			5.674*		
	34.904***					

## Notes:

Statistical significance:  $p \leq 0.01$ \*\*\*;  $p \leq 0.05$ \*\*;  $p \leq 0.1$ \*;  $p > 0.1$  ns.

that bachelorhood is not the social norm in rural China and that marital-type cohabitation and family formation outside of marriage are rarely accepted, an assumption can be made that prolonged or even permanent bachelorhood – *a fortiori*, when associated with poverty – might generate frustration and a

Table 3: **Bachelors' Opinions on Causes and Consequences of Bachelorhood, JC County, 2008 (% , multiple choice)**

	30–39 (n = 128)	40+ (n = 160)	Total (N = 288)
<b>In your opinion, what are the reasons why you cannot marry?</b>			
Women shortage (Chi2 = 4.884*)			
– agree	25.0	28.1	26.7
– disagree	32.0	41.3	37.2
Poverty (Chi2 = 23.985***)			
– agree	57.0	82.5	71.2
– disagree	25.8	8.1	16.0
Low education level (Chi2 = 0.3554 ns)			
– agree	41.4	39.4	40.3
– disagree	47.7	47.5	47.6
Too shy (Chi2 = 1.3612 ns)			
– agree	32.0	35.0	33.7
– disagree	46.1	39.4	42.4
<b>In your opinion, what are the hardest situations to bear because of bachelorhood?</b>			
Loneliness (Chi2 = 2.945 ns)			
– agree	52.3	61.9	57.6
– disagree	25.8	22.5	24.0
Lack of affection (Chi2 = 1.897 ns)			
– agree	53.9	61.9	58.3
– disagree	25.8	20.6	22.9
No sex (Chi2 = 1.262 ns)			
– agree	41.4	47.5	44.8
– disagree	32.0	26.9	29.2
No child (Chi2 = 1.897 ns)			
– agree	42.2	49.4	46.2
– disagree	34.4	27.5	30.6
Social pressure (Chi2 = 1.562ns)			
– agree	57.0	53.8	55.2
– disagree	19.5	25.6	22.9
Family pressure (Chi2 = 6.893**)			
– agree	72.7	58.1	64.5
– disagree	13.3	22.5	18.4
<b>In your opinion, what are the hardest situations to bear because of childlessness?</b>			
No old-age support (Chi2 = 3.351 ns)			
– agree	43.0	53.1	48.6
– disagree	32.0	28.8	30.2
Impossibility of continuing family line (Chi2 = 6.649**)			
– agree	35.2	48.8	42.7
– disagree	41.4	36.9	38.9

*Continued*

**Table 3: Continued**

	30–39 (n = 128)	40+ (n = 160)	Total (N = 288)
Life without a child is not “complete” (Chi2 = 0.147 ns)			
– agree	51.6	51.3	51.4
– disagree	28.9	30.6	29.9
Social pressure: environment may “gossip” (Chi2 = 0.028 ns)			
– agree	53.9	54.4	54.2
– disagree	26.6	26.9	26.7

Note:

Statistical significance:  $p \leq 0.01^{***}$ ;  $p \leq 0.05^{**}$ ;  $p \leq 0.1^*$ ;  $p > 0.1$  ns.

sense of marginalization and malaise among bachelors. To that purpose, several questions were asked to determine how bachelorhood impacts self-perception and life plans.

Table 3 illustrates the various emotional and existential frustrations experienced by the majority of bachelors. According to the findings, the men consider social and family pressures to marry and have children the worst aspects of being a bachelor in JC county. As a rule, the high premium still placed on marriage and parenthood results in family and social pressures on unmarried people once they have reached a certain age, especially in rural areas.<sup>45</sup> In our sample, pressure from the contact circle is considered the hardest to bear by the vast majority of young bachelors: 72.7 per cent complain of family pressure and more than half complain of social pressure. With age and the diminishing likelihood of marriage, there is seemingly less pressure from the contact circle, and it is therefore felt less acutely.

Childlessness, which implies the absence of old-age support from offspring and the impossibility of continuing the family line, is also a complaint by a significant share of never-married males (46.2 per cent), but it is regretted more frequently by the oldest for whom the probability of marriage, and hence fatherhood, is predictably lower. This is made hard to bear mainly by social pressure from the contact circle, but also because, for half of them, a fulfilled life entails having children. The need to be looked after in old age is cited by 48.6 per cent of never-married males. Carrying on the family line also remains a male concern (for 42.7 per cent of the never-married), but chiefly among the oldest – obviously, uncertainty about their family future, and their greater attachment to traditional values that comes from their older age, makes this a greater worry for them.

Bachelorhood is also clearly related to emotional wellbeing: more than half of the never-married males report suffering from loneliness and a lack of affection, with no significant difference by age group, indicating that the majority are still

45 Zhang and Zhong 2005; Wei, Jin and Li 2008.

searching for a satisfactory emotional compensation for their bachelorhood. Interestingly, absence of sexual activity is reported as being among the worst things to bear by less than half of the never-married males, regardless of age group. This suggests that the majority either have access to some form of sexual activity outside the permissible framework of marriage, or are settling for a sex-less life. These assumptions are explored below.

### How Bachelorhood Impacts Male Sexuality in JC County

Sexuality has long been a highly sensitive issue in China. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), in particular, saw the tightening of social controls, and all matter relating to privacy, including sexuality, was banned.<sup>46</sup> It was not until the social liberalization and the opening up of China in the 1980s that it was permissible to study sexual behaviour. Since then several studies and surveys covering this area have been conducted, including work by the sociologists Liu Dalin 刘达临, Pan Suiming 潘绥铭 and Li Yinhe 李银河.<sup>47</sup> However, as far as we are aware, no Chinese study has been undertaken on the sexual behaviour of single men despite the significance of the issue in the context of an increasing male marriage squeeze.

Although major social changes have taken place in the wake of economic reforms and pre-marital sexual activity is beginning to be accepted in urban centres, especially for men,<sup>48</sup> reproduction is still largely confined to married couples and non-marital sexual activity remains widely frowned upon.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, a growing section of the male population will remain childless and unable to have sexual relations in a legitimate setting. It can then be assumed that married and never-married men form two distinct groups in terms of sexual behaviour. Our survey explores whether the sexuality of bachelors differs from that of married men. Are never-married men excluded from any sexual activity? If not, can we consider that their sexual activity is affected by the lack of a legitimate partner within marriage? As less than 50 per cent of the bachelors complain about the absence of sexual activity, can we assume that the others are finding satisfying alternatives?

In our sample, the timing of a first sexual experience varies little according to marital status: by the age of 20, three in four men had had their first sperm emission and, by the age of 30, about one in three had already masturbated. However, their first experience sexual intercourse is highly dependent on marital status: at the age of 30, only one in three never-married men (32 per cent) had had sexual intercourse at least once; married men in this age group logically had all had sexual intercourse (with  $\text{Chi}^2 = 7.542^{**}$ ). At the age of 40, the share of

46 Honig 2003.

47 See, for instance, Liu 1992; Liu 2005; Pan 1993; Pan 1997; Pan et al. 2004; Pan 2006; Huang and Pan 2007; Li, Yinhe 2008; Li, Yinhe 2004; Li, Yinhe 1992; Li, Yinhe 1998.

48 Parish, Laumann and Mojola 2007, 737; Huang 2011.

49 Pan 2006, 33.

never-married men having had sexual intercourse is not much greater: 35.3 per cent. In other words, by the age of 40, two in three never-married men have never experienced any partnered-sex. Of the 288 never-married respondents aged 30 or above, only 162 (56.2 per cent of the subsample) reported having had sexual intercourse at least once in their lifetime,<sup>50</sup> and of those only 96 (33.3 per cent) reported having had sexual intercourse at least once in the 12 months preceding the survey (Table 4). Bachelors not only have much less partnered-sex than their married counterparts but they also differ in terms of partners, with a much lower average number during their lifetime (0.7 against 1.5 for married men)<sup>51</sup> and during the 12 months prior to the survey taking place (0.5 against 0.9). This confirms that marital status is a determinant of the number of sexual partners. However, it must be noted that the average number of sexual partners in China is particularly low compared to that found in other countries with admittedly very different socio-cultural contexts.<sup>52</sup>

Bachelors have, on the whole, less sexual intercourse than their married counterparts, although the youngest groups in both sets of men are more sexually active than the oldest. In JC county, the absence of a legitimate partner associated with bachelorhood therefore has a significant effect on partnered-sexual activity: only one in seven bachelors (14.6 per cent) reported having had their last sexual relations with a girlfriend, and this was predominantly a characteristic shared by the youngest (22.6 per cent against 8.1 per cent among those aged 40+). But despite having what is presumed to be a regular partner, these bachelors still had much less sexual intercourse than married men: 0.8 times a month in the 12 months preceding the survey. Therefore, it is not just the state of bachelorhood itself, but also the lack of marital-type cohabitation and possibly the limited privacy afforded by living with parents and/or siblings that appear to act as additional obstacles to the partnered-sexual activity of bachelors. This is in spite of the larger housing in rural China, which can provide more privacy to individual household members.<sup>53</sup> It is also notable that among the bachelors who had their last sexual intercourse with a girlfriend, only seven (2.4 per cent of the sample) expected to marry within a year, presumably with the girlfriend in question, suggesting that the possibility of marriage is not determined only by access to a potential partner.

In this context, and assuming that most people look for an active sex life,<sup>54</sup> finding satisfying alternatives to partnered-sex within marriage is assumed to be an issue for the bachelors. There are two main compensation practices: paid-for sex (with prostitutes) and masturbation. While masturbation is in theory accessible to everyone, the sex industry – which is said to be active in most

50 This includes both heterosexual and homosexual intercourse.

51 These results are consistent with those of Liu's survey (Liu 1992) in which rural married men reported having on average 1.1 lifetime sexual partners.

52 In France in 2006, men reported having an average of 11.6 lifetime sexual partners: see Léridon 2008.

53 Yan 2003.

54 Martin and George 2006, 108.

Table 4: **Sexual Behaviour by Marital Status and Age Group (%), JC County, 2008**

	Never-married			Married		
	30–39 (n = 128)	40 + (n = 160)	Total (N = 288)	30–39 (n = 101)	40 + (n = 134)	Total (N = 235)
Have you ever had sexual intercourse?						
– Yes	67.2	47.5	56.2	99.0	99.2	99.2
Chi2	11.326***			0.040 ns		
	164.293***					
Have you had sexual intercourse at least once in the 12 months preceding the survey?						
– Yes	43.8	25.0	33.3	97.0	88.1	91.9
Chi2	11.245***			6.971**		
	206.776***					
Have you ever masturbated?						
– Yes	53.1	30.0	40.3	38.6	35.3	36.6
Chi2	15.872***			0.310ns		
	0.7412 ns					
Average frequency of sexual intercourse per month, 12 months	1.2	0.5	0.8	4.2	3.4	3.8
Student's <i>t</i> Statistic	2.547**			1.560*		
	11.146***					
Average number of sexual partners, 12 months	0.6	0.4	0.5	1.1	0.8	0.9
Student's <i>t</i> Statistic	0.979 ns			3.291***		
	4.258***					
Average number of sexual partners, whole life	1.1	0.5	0.7	1.9	1.1	1.5
Student's <i>t</i> Statistic	3.032**			3.244***		
	4.529***					
Average frequency of masturbation per month, 12 months	0.9	0.4	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.4
Student's <i>t</i> Statistic	2.966**			0.212 ns		
	2.058**					

Notes:

p ≤ 0.01\*\*\*; p ≤ 0.05\*\*; p ≤ 0.1\*; p &gt; 0.1 ns.

rural areas – is likely to provide male farmers opportunities for nearby premarital sex.<sup>55</sup> However, neither of these practices, even if more frequently reported in the present survey than in Pan's study,<sup>56</sup> is very widespread: less than one in five bachelors (18.8 per cent, or 23.4 per cent of those aged 30–39 years and 15.0 per cent of those aged 40+) claimed to have paid for sexual intercourse,<sup>57</sup> with no significant difference by age group. Interestingly, 4.9 per cent of the bachelors reported that their most recent sexual intercourse experience was with a prostitute (7.0 per cent of the youngest and 3.1 per cent of the oldest, with  $\text{Chi}^2 = 15.603^{***}$ ), making prostitutes an infrequent alternative to partnered-sex within marriage in JC county.

Masturbation, although seen as an acceptable substitute for the lack of a sexual partner by approximately two in three men, was only practised by two in five of the men interviewed (40.3 per cent of the never-married and 36.6 per cent of the married, with no significant difference). Among them, just under half reported “always” or “often” achieving orgasm through masturbation. The low number of men reporting such episodes is consistent with the findings of Pan et al.'s survey<sup>58</sup> in which 55.2 per cent of males aged below 40 and 45.7 per cent of those aged 40 or above had masturbated.<sup>59</sup> It can be partly attributed to the fact that, in China, masturbation is still widely regarded as immoral, detrimental to health and even a cause of male impotence.<sup>60</sup> Such views are corroborated by our survey, which shows that one in two men (48.4 per cent irrespective of age group or marital status) believe frequent masturbation to be unhealthy. According to the survey, bachelors masturbated more than married men, but not much more (0.6 times on average during the month preceding the survey, as against 0.4 for married men). This difference is unlikely to compensate fully for their lower frequency of partnered-sex.

As reported in Table 5, just under half of all bachelors complained about the absence of sexual activity, suggesting, as assumed above, that the majority of others either have access to some form of sexual activity, or are settling for a sexless life. We therefore have two different configurations. Among those who did not complain about the absence of sexual activity (159 bachelors or 55.2 per cent of the sample), more than one in three (35.9 per cent with  $n = 57$ ) recorded

55 Tucker et al. 2005, 542.

56 Actually, in Pan et al.'s survey, these percentages are 11.3 and 6.4 in the two age-groups respectively (Pan 2006, 23).

57 However, we must recognize that the presence of members from the local family planning bureau may have made many respondents feel uncomfortable in truthfully answering questions on prostitution. Perhaps a number of them were embarrassed or afraid to admit having seen a prostitute, which may to some extent explain those low percentages. This must be considered as a possible bias.

58 Pan et al. 2004, 22.

59 In the survey conducted by Das, Parish and Laumann (2009) on a sample of urban men, 35% of interviewees reported having masturbated in the 12 months preceding the survey. Nevertheless, the frequency of male masturbation in China seems low compared to other countries. For example, in a survey conducted in France in 2006, 91.4% of men reported that they had masturbated at least once in their lifetime: see Bozon 2008, 275.

60 See Wu and Hu 2009. In Liu's survey (Liu 1992), 41.1% of urban men and 73.4% of rural men considered masturbation as “bad.”

Table 5: **Bachelors' Characteristics and Behaviours According to Whether or Not They Complain about Absence of Sexual Activity, JC County, 2008**

	Complain about absence of sexual activity (N = 129) (44.8 %)			Do not complain about absence of sexual activity (N = 159) (55.2 %)		
	Have experienced both sexual intercourse and masturbation (lifetime) (N = 37)	Have experienced sexual intercourse or masturbation (lifetime) (N = 61)	Have not experienced sexual intercourse or masturbation (lifetime) (N = 31)	Have experienced both sexual intercourse and masturbation (lifetime) (N = 41)	Have experienced sexual intercourse or masturbation (lifetime) (N = 61)	Have not experienced sexual intercourse or masturbation (lifetime) (N = 57)
Illiterates (%)	5.4	9.8	32.3	7.3	3.3	19.3
Chi2	10.497 ***			8.827 ***		
	1.029ns					
Mean length of schooling (years)	8.3	6.7	4.8	7.9	7.5	5.9
Fisher test	10.30 ***			6.38 ***		
T-test	0.843 ns					
Working in agriculture only (%)	19.4	18.0	16.2	14.6	21.3	35.1
Chi2	0.117 n.s.			5.945 *		
	1.191 ns					
Average monthly income <1000 yuan (%)	75.7	68.9	96.8	51.2	91.8	89.5
Chi2	11.93 ***			27.1175 ***		
	0.383 ns					
Mean monthly income (yuan)	614.9	745.9	411.3	1054.9	495.9	443.0

Fisher test	4.48 **			25.95 ***		
	0.111 ns					
Average number of sexual partners (lifetime)	1.1	0.5	–	1.8	1.1	–
Student's <i>t</i> statistic	7.06 ***			11.78 ***		
	1.530 *					
Average number of sexual partners per month (12 months)	1.0	0.4	–	0.9	0.5	–
Student's <i>t</i> statistic	3.35 **			9.08 ***		
	0.294 ns					
Average frequency of sexual intercourse per month (12 months)	1.7	0.8	–	1.5	1.0	–
Student's <i>t</i> statistic	3.62 **			5.38 ***		
	0.304 ns					
Average frequency of masturbation per month (12 months)	2.0	0.2	–	1.6	0.3	–
Student's <i>t</i> statistic	4.7911 ***			3.576 ***		
	0.039 ns					
Median age (years)	38.5	41.3	47.1	34.7	40.5	43.8
Fisher test	6.65***			11.77***		
T-test	1.526 ns					

Notes:

Statistical significance:  $p \leq 0.01$ \*\*\*;  $p \leq 0.05$ \*\*;  $p \leq 0.1$ \*;  $p > 0.1$  ns.

that they had never masturbated or had sexual intercourse during their lifetime, meaning that they are settling for a sexless life. The remaining 64.1 per cent (with  $n = 102$ ) reported that they had masturbated and/or had sexual intercourse at least once in their lifetime, and therefore had access to some form of sexual activity before marriage (with  $\text{Chi}^2 = 11.640^{***}$ ). However, this was far less than the sexual experiences reported by married men.

Interestingly, there are no significant differences between the characteristics and sexual behaviour of men who complain about the absence of sexual activity and those who do not. The most striking result is again that the bachelors who have never experienced any partnered-sex or masturbation – who are also older than the others – are on the whole the most disadvantaged: they are less educated, have lower average incomes and are more frequently engaged in agriculture only, confirming the statements above.

## Discussion

Our survey indicates that the sexuality of bachelors in JC county differs from that of married men. Assuming that most people look for an active sex life, our findings lead us to conclude that sexuality is affected by the lack of a marriage partner. On average, bachelors have rather limited access to sexual activity compared with married men: overall, they have much less frequent partnered sexual intercourse, and the extent to which they masturbate does not seem to make up for this. Yet, not all unmarried men are in the same boat. Although the majority have access to some form of sexual activity, a significant number do not: while only 27.1 per cent of bachelors have experienced both sexual intercourse and masturbation at least once in their life, another one in three (30.6 per cent) have experienced neither. For a significant portion of the bachelors, sexual activity is obviously impacted by their single status.

However, there is evidence of some change among members of the younger generation, who in general enjoy greater access to sexual activity before marriage than their elders. As seen above, one in five bachelors aged below 40 last had sexual intercourse with a girlfriend (but only 8.1 per cent of the oldest) and they have a slightly higher frequency of paid sex: 7 per cent reported to have had their last sexual intercourse with a prostitute, against 3.1 per cent of the oldest (with  $\text{Chi}^2 = 15.603^{**}$ ). It is fair to say that the prevailing moral and social prejudices about premarital sex are an obstacle to experimentation with sex for a significant number of never-married men in JC county. However, this is not the case for some of the younger generation of bachelors who find some emotional and sexual outlets. This could be attributed to the young placing less value on traditional concepts, including social taboos about sex before marriage, but also because they are more likely to migrate and are more frequently involved in activities other than agriculture, which could presumably facilitate their access to casual sex. However, as stated above, they report only slightly more access to paid-for sex than the older group.

To a large extent, a considerable share of the men experiencing prolonged or even permanent bachelorhood in JC county go through life as second-class citizens in that they have only partial or no access to certain facets of what is considered in most societies as an ordinary life: they are unable to enjoy regular sexual activity, raise children or share their daily life with a partner. In JC county, as in many parts of rural China, all of these basic expectations remain the preserve of married men. Moreover, having on average low educational levels, low incomes and being more frequently engaged in agriculture only, bachelors generally endure harsher living conditions. Thus, marital status has a significant effect on a male's private life.

At the national level, the annual male surplus in the marriage market is estimated to be around 0.4 million and so the female shortage currently has only a limited impact on men's chances to get married and enjoy legitimate sex within that setting. However, the situation will worsen in the coming years with the annual male surplus expected to reach 1.2 million between 2015 and 2020, and then exceed 1.5 million between 2025 and 2030.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, even if the experiences of the bachelors interviewed in JC county cannot be applied to the country as a whole, they can be used to foreshadow the conditions likely to be faced by a growing number of Chinese men. Moreover, although poverty is seen as the most prominent factor behind involuntary bachelorhood in China today,<sup>62</sup> as the male surplus in the marriage and sexual markets grows, a larger number of better-off men will inevitably be impacted in the near future.

In response to this trend, major social changes will necessarily occur. The most plausible one might be an increased tolerance towards non-marital sex, as pre-figured by the changing behaviour of the younger generations interviewed in our survey and by other studies.<sup>63</sup> If this is the case, the question remains: what forms will this non-marital sex take? More diversified forms of sexual behaviour might be a possible response to the sex imbalance. First, the growing gap between the numbers of men and women on the marriage and sexual markets may lead to increased marital mobility as women are increasingly subjected to sexual solicitations from bachelors. Also, as heterosexual marriage will no longer be a universality, it may lead to an increase in open homosexuality, as homosexual men will no longer be forced into heterosexuality within marriage. Different schools of thought contend on the question of whether homosexuality results from a personal choice or is biologically determined.<sup>64</sup> The purpose of this article is not to discuss this issue but to try to anticipate the possible consequences of the sex imbalance on the marriage and sexual markets, with particular reference to the direct impact on the sexual behaviour of the marriage-squeezed bachelors. A possibility is that, considering the prevailing hetero-normativity in China

61 Li, Shuzhuo et al. 2006.

62 Li, Shuzhuo et al. 2010.

63 Yan 2003; Parish, Laumann and Mojola 2007.

64 MacCulloch and Waddington 1981; Waites 2005.

and in the absence of a legitimate heterosexual partner within marriage, some of the bachelors may try to find – or express more openly – alternative sexual behaviours, homosexuality included.

Whatever forms this increased level of sexual activity before marriage will take, the increasing sex imbalance in the marriage and sexual markets will necessarily lead to a loosening of the social and traditional norms governing sexual behaviour in China and, ultimately, will hopefully lead to a better recognition of sexual rights. Moreover, this increasing prevalence of non-marital sex will obviously have an impact on traditional family arrangements in the medium term, as an increasing number of Chinese men will not have the opportunity to form a family and raise children within marriage. Although all the possible future changes are not yet well defined, it is certain that this sex imbalance will impact Chinese society in various ways.

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