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Male Singlehood, Poverty and Sexuality in Rural China: An Exploratory Survey

In China, marriage is still a highly valued social norm, and until the 1990s, practically everyone was able to marry. The situation has changed, however, and a rising proportion of men, in rural areas especially, will experience prolonged and even permanent singlehood due to the growing shortage of women on the marriage market (Banister, 2004). In the cultural context of China, singlehood is a state of frustration, and even of deprivation, for which it is difficult to find socially acceptable compensations: having children, living with a partner, having sexual relations, are aspects of life from which single men may be excluded.

While several attempts have been made to measure the impact on male singlehood of a shortage of women (Li et al., 2006 ; Tuljapurkar et al., 1995), little is known about the effects of singlehood on men's personal situation. How, and to what extent, can unwanted singlehood affect the lives of the men concerned? Do they find alternative means to achieve a satisfactory sexual life? Are their socioeconomic characteristics different from those of married men? These are all questions to which the "survey on the family situation and reproductive health of single men in rural China" (*Zhongguo nongcun nanxing shengzhi jiankang he jiating shenghuo diaocha*), conducted in 2008 in a rural county of Anhui province (referred to here as JC county) sought to find answers. This is an exploratory survey on a subject (sexuality) which remains sensitive in China. It aims to identify new research questions and to pave the way for further data collection initiatives. Only the results illustrating the specific characteristics of single men, by contrast with married men, will be presented here.

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I. An exploratory survey on a sensitive topic

General research background

Like many other societies across the world, China is a country where marriage is traditionally universal (Blayo, 1997), and an obligatory first stage in family formation. Chinese society is still imbued with Confucianist tradition which places particular value upon the continuation of the family line and upon filial piety. In the Chinese context, these virtues can only be expressed through formal union and the production of descendants, two stages considered as essential in the life of an individual. Marriage is a means not only to perpetuate patrilineal traditions (Liu, 2005), but also to establish new kinship ties useful to the development of social and economic networks (Johnson, 1992). Chinese society offers few alternatives to marriage. Non-marital cohabitation – extremely rare – is generally no more than a preliminary to marriage, and being single is not a valued status (Evans, 1997; Li and Jin, 2006). In the fifth census (2000), among the 30-34 age group, only 7.5% of men and 1.3% of women had never been married; at age 50 the proportions were just 4.1% and 0.2%, respectively, below the levels recorded in other countries of the region (Attané and Barbieri, 2009).

Yet universal marriage is set to become a thing of the past, for men at least, firstly because of the change in the sex ratio. When the number of births decreases rapidly over time, as is the case in China since the 1970s, the cohorts of men entering the marriage market at a given age are larger than those of the slightly younger women – given the age difference between spouses – who are available to marry them (MacDonald, 1995). This results in a surplus of men with respect to potential wives who are a few years their junior, making it difficult for men to find marriage partners. While this imbalance can be attenuated by various adjustment processes (more frequent female remarriage, increase in age difference between spouses, or marriages with foreign women) (Li et al., 2006 ; Le Bach et al., 2007), a fraction of the male population will be excluded from marriage. Moreover, this phenomenon is aggravated by the elimination of unwanted girls,⁽¹⁾ which has created a growing deficit of women among the cohorts born since the 1980s, (Attané, 2010) and, in certain regions, by female emigration to more developed regions (Fan and Huang, 1998). As a consequence of these combined trends, several million men will be unable to marry: from the early 2010s, the male surplus on the marriage market will exceed 10%, representing 1 to 1.5 million individuals each year (Li et al., 2006).

These cohorts will join a second group of unmarried men, those who, in rural areas especially, are excluded from marriage for economic reasons (Contreras, 1989; Pagès, 2001). These are men who cannot find a wife because they are unable to afford the rising cost of marriage and because their

(1) Through sex-selective abortion or by neglect resulting in premature death (Attané, 2010).

socioeconomic status is low (Banister, 2004). Under the prevailing social and family norms, these men, who represent a growing category in China today, will never be able to form a family. In the Chinese cultural context, this is by no means a trivial issue, since marriage is not only a necessary stage in family formation, but also remains, in rural society especially, the sole legitimate framework for sexuality. While the economic reforms launched in the late 1970s brought social changes in their wake, and while the first signs of a legitimation of premarital sexuality are visible in the cities, for men at least (Parish et al., 2007), officialized and legal monogamous marriage is a necessary precondition for sexual activity and for family formation in rural areas (Liu, 1992).

In this context, singlehood may be a source of dissatisfaction (familial, sexual and emotional frustration, lack of social recognition) whose individual and collective impact is as yet poorly understood. While certain researchers have studied the presumed consequences of a massive increase in the number of unattached males at the level of society as a whole,⁽²⁾ no studies have yet, to our knowledge, focused on the impact of imposed singlehood at individual level.

Circumstances and limits of the survey

In this context, which is not only unprecedented (China has the world's highest proportion of males in its population), but also massive (several tens of millions of males are potentially concerned by involuntary singlehood) and long-lasting (the effects of the shortage of women on the marriage market may persist until 2030 and beyond), there was a clear need for an exploratory study of the question. But in China, even more so than in western societies, sexuality is a highly sensitive issue. The Chinese social and cultural environment is shaped by Taoist and Confucianist traditions, but is still imbued with the austerity and social control imposed by three decades of communism (Dikötter, 1995; Yan, 2003). For this reason, it was not until the social liberalization of the 1990s that the study of sexual behaviour became possible in China. Since then, the question has been widely researched, with studies by Liu (1992; 2005), Pan (1993a; 1993b; 1997), Huang and Pan (2007) and Li (1991; 1992; 2004; 2008) among others. Most of them focus on the urban environment, however. To our knowledge, no studies have yet been devoted exclusively to rural society, where traditional social values are still strong, or to the sexual practices of single men.

The survey conducted in 2008 seeks to address this dual objective: to better understand sexual behaviour in rural China, and to explore sexual practices

(2) One social representation involves considering that a massive increase in the number of unattached males would lead to an upsurge in prostitution, male homosexuality, risk behaviours (alcohol, drugs) and violence, thus creating social instability and subsequent political repercussions. See, e.g., Hudson and den Boer (2004), Poston and Glover (2005), Eberstadt (2000).

in a context of strong social and political control. As in many other countries, in the developing world especially, the population could not be approached without the consent of the local authorities, who also took part in discussion groups. The questionnaires were administered by employees of the county family planning bureau, supervised and trained by two researchers from Xi'an Jiaotong University (Shaanxi) who remained present throughout the survey (see Box below). These constraints did not affect the smooth running of the survey nor, judging by the results obtained, did they impair the quality of the responses.

Survey methodology

The survey sample was selected randomly (cluster sampling method) in several villages of JC county. The county was divided into three zones, and two townships or towns were selected in each zone, making a total of six. Four administrative villages in each of these townships or towns were then drawn at random, to obtain 24 in all. Last, in each village, 15 single men were drawn at random to obtain five men in each age group (28-34; 35-44 and 45+), forming an initially selected total of 360 single men aged 28 or above. When a total of five men in an age group could not be reached, the shortfall was remedied by drawing men from the next lowest age group whenever possible. If necessary, the selection was extended to include men aged 27 and to the villages of a neighbouring township. Altogether, the sample of single men was thus selected from seven townships and towns of JC county.

The sample of married men was then selected in line with that of single men, with a ratio of 2 to 3. A total of 665 men were invited to fill in the questionnaire, of whom 38 dropped out during administration (a dropout rate of 5.7%). Another six questionnaires (0.9%) were rejected because they had been filled in too quickly (in less than 20 minutes). This resulted in 621 exploitable questionnaires (93.4% of the initial sample), of which 41.5% (258) were filled in by married men and 58.5% (363) by single men.

To guarantee anonymity and ensure that respondents were able to answer freely, computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) was used. An interviewer was nonetheless present to provide technical assistance if necessary. For sensitive questions, interviewers were instructed to leave the respondent to answer on his own. Before administering the questionnaires, an interviewer read out to each respondent the rules concerning personal data protection and explained that they were free to withdraw from the survey at any time. For respondents who were illiterate (38 cases) or had a low educational level, the interviewer, with the respondent's consent, read out the questions and explained at each stage how to answer. The respondents then chose the relevant response on their own. Respondents were given 45-60 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

From a demographic viewpoint, JC county was quite representative of the national situation: it totalled slightly less than 800,000 inhabitants in 2000, with 103.9 men per 100 women (versus 106.3 for China as a whole), and had a very skewed sex ratio among the under-5s in 2008 (118.9 boys per 100 girls versus 120.2 for China as a whole), 15% above normally expected levels. A large majority of single persons aged 27 or above (63.9%) are men. Last, its

marriage market is characterized by a strong propensity for endogamy: 82.2% of married male respondents had a wife from the same county (a wife from the same village in one-third of cases). Their mean age at first marriage was 25.1 years at the time of the survey (compared with 25.7 years in China in 2000). In addition, only four single men (1.1%) reported cohabiting with a steady partner, confirming the low propensity of Chinese couples to cohabit outside marriage, and hence the validity of using single status to define the absence of non-marital cohabitation.

Of course, the situation in JC county cannot be generalized to the country as a whole, and even less to other regions of the world. This exploratory survey nonetheless sheds light on the more general situation of single men living in rural areas.

II. The single men of JC county: a different form of sexuality

In rural China, sexual relations before marriage, while increasingly acknowledged,⁽³⁾ remain stigmatized (Pan, 1993a; Parish et al., 2007). So the sexuality of single men raises a number of questions. To what extent is their sexual activity curtailed by the absence of an official partner? Do they form a homogeneous group in terms of sexual practice? In the survey, fewer than half of the single men (43.5%, with no significant difference by age) reported being frustrated by a lack of sexual activity. This implies that the majority either engage in sexual activity outside marriage or are satisfied with a life of sexual abstinence.

Sexual relations affected by singlehood

In the sample, the timing of first sexual experience varies little by marital status. By age 20, three men in four have experienced their first sperm emission, and by age 30 around one in three has already masturbated, with no significant difference by marital status. First sexual intercourse is very dependent on marital status, however. At age 30, only one single man in three (32.0%) has experienced sexual intercourse at least once, while married men of this age have, logically, all done so. At age 40, the proportion is barely higher, 35.3%. Out of the 363 single men interviewed, whose median age was 37.8 years, 150 (41.3%) reported never having had sexual intercourse (Table 1). A further 75 single men (bringing the total to 225, i.e. 62.0% of single men) reported no sexual intercourse over the 12 months preceding the survey.⁽⁴⁾

(3) In the survey by Liu (1992), one in three rural men (34.6%) reported having had sexual relations before marriage.

(4) Out of the 213 single men who reported at least one sexual relation, only 157 answered the questions on their sexuality. The remaining quarter (56) decided not to reply, perhaps because they considered their sexuality to be illegitimate, or because they saw no point in replying since their experience of sexual relations was very limited.

Table 1. Sexual activity and frequency of intercourse, China, JC county, 2008

	Single men			Married men		
	Age 27-39	Age 40+	Overall	Age 27-39	Age 40+	Overall
Number	203	160	363	124	134	258
Have you had sexual intercourse at least once in your life? (%)						
Yes	67.5	47.5	58.7	99.2	99.2	99.2
No	32.5	52.5	41.3	0.8	0.8	0.8
χ^2	14.78***			0.03 ^{n.s.}		
	175.53***					
Have you had sexual intercourse at least once in the 12 months preceding the survey? (%)						
Yes	48.3	25.0	38.0	97.6	88.1	92.7
No	51.7	75.0	62.0	2.4	11.9	7.3
χ^2	21.05***			9.42***		
	214.32***					
Mean monthly number of sexual relations, 12 months	1.5	0.5	1.0	4.9	3.3	4.1
Student's <i>t</i> -statistic	3.51***			2.99***		
	11.64***					
<i>Note:</i> The tests compare the youngest versus the oldest men in each group (single and married), and single men versus married men.						
<i>Statistical significance:</i> ***: $p \leq 0.01$; **: $p \leq 0.05$; *: $p \leq 0.1$; non significant ^{n.s.} : $p > 0.1$.						
<i>Source:</i> Authors' survey.						

In all respects, the sexual activity of single men is significantly lower than that of married men, with, respectively, 1.0 versus 4.1 reported sexual relations per month on average. The oldest men, who have intercourse seven times less frequently than their married counterparts in the same age group (respectively, 0.5 and 3.3 times per month on average), are the group whose sexuality is most strongly affected. With 1.5 sexual relations per month on average, younger single men are slightly less disadvantaged by their marital status, but are still much less sexually active than married men of the same age group (4.9 per month) (Table 1).

As a general rule, Chinese men have fewer sexual partners than in other countries where the sociocultural context is very different.⁽⁵⁾ In the survey by Liu (1992), married men reported 1.1 sexual partners over their lifetime, and a comparable number (1.2) was reported by the respondents ($N = 621$) in our own survey. It was slightly higher among married men (1.5) but lower among singles (0.9) (Table 2).

(5) In France, in 2006, for example, men aged 18-69 reported an average of 11.6 partners over their lifetime (Leridon, 2008).

Table 2. Number of sexual partners, China, JC county, 2008

	Single men			Married men		
	Age 27-39	Age 40+	Overall	Age 27-39	Age 40+	Overall
Number	203	160	363	124	134	258
Mean number of sexual partners, 12 months	0.7	0.4	0.6	1.1	0.8	0.9
Student's <i>t</i> -statistic	2.19**		3.47***			3.43***
Mean lifetime number of sexual partners	1.3	0.5	0.9	2.0	1.1	1.5
Student's <i>t</i> -statistic	3.91***		3.76***			3.41***
<i>Statistical significance:</i> ***: $p \leq 0.01$; **: $p \leq 0.05$; *: $p \leq 0.1$; non significant ^{n.s.} : $p > 0.1$.						
<i>Source:</i> Authors' survey.						

Marital status, followed by age, are thus two key determinants of the frequency of sexual activity and of the number of partners. But the discriminatory nature of singlehood is further reinforced by the fact that even single men who reported having their most recent sexual relation with a girlfriend (42.7% with $N = 157$), and who presumably have an intimate relationship with a regular partner, are not as sexually active as married men (1.8 relations per month over the 12 months preceding the survey, versus 4.1 for married men), and are barely more active than the other single men whose most recent sexual relation was with a casual partner (1.5). In addition to singlehood itself, the absence of non-marital cohabitation appears to be a further obstacle to the sexuality of single men.

Masturbation: a partially compensatory practice

Since single men have more limited access than married men to sexual activity with a partner, they could logically be expected to engage more frequently in compensatory sexual practices such as masturbation (Das et al., 2007).

This is partly verified in the survey, in which a minority of single men (27.5%) report finding alternatives to masturbation to satisfy their sexual needs. But while masturbation is seen as an acceptable alternative to the absence of a partner by around two men in three, fewer than one in two (41.1%, with $N = 621$) report having already masturbated – among whom fewer than half (48.5%) report reaching orgasm “always” or “often” in this way. This low proportion compared with other countries⁽⁶⁾ probably reflects the negative

(6) In France, the proportion is 91.4% (Bozon, 2008). In Chinese surveys, whose results are not readily comparable, masturbation is reported by a minority of men. In the survey by Liu (1992), 10% of married men in rural areas and 17% in urban areas reported masturbating before marriage; in the survey by Das et al. (2007), 35% of city-dwellers had masturbated in the 12 months preceding the survey.

Table 3. Practice of masturbation, China, JC county, 2008

	Single men			Married men		
	Age 27-39	Age 40+	Overall	Age 27-39	Age 40+	Overall
Number	203	160	363	124	134	258
Have already masturbated (%)	54.2	30.0	43.5	40.3	35.3	37.7
χ^2	21.65***			0.76 n.s.		
	2.20 n.s.					
Number	99	37	136	41	36	77
Mean number of masturbation episodes in month preceding survey	2.0	1.5	1.9	1.1	1.3	1.2
Student's <i>t</i> -statistic	0.96 n.s.			0.61 n.s.		
	2.14***					

Statistical significance: ***: $p \leq 0.01$; **: $p \leq 0.05$; *: $p \leq 0.1$; non significant n.s.: $p > 0.1$.
Source: Authors' survey.

perception of masturbation in China, where it is still widely considered to be immoral, detrimental to health and even a cause of male impotence⁽⁷⁾ (Zha and Geng, 1992). In fact, one in two men in the survey (50.1%), regardless of age or marital status, consider that masturbation may be damaging to health, and one in four (27.2%) associates it with immoral behaviour. This may explain why barely more single men than married men report having masturbated, and why their frequency of masturbation is only very slightly higher (0.7 times on average, with $N = 363$, in the month preceding the survey, versus 0.4 for married men). When they do masturbate, the frequency is slightly higher than for married men: 1.9 and 1.2 times per month, respectively (Table 3). This difference does not fully compensate for the lower frequency of sexual intercourse, however. In all respects, the sexual activity of single men is affected by their marital status. But is singlehood the only obstacle to a more active sexuality? Do other characteristics of single men also weigh against them? Do they all face equal discrimination in terms of sexual activity?

III. Poverty: an obstacle to marriage and sexual activity

When the poorest are excluded from marriage

The survey respondents were asked about two socioeconomic characteristics: their income and their level of education. In both cases, single men are at a disadvantage. First, the majority belong to the low-income category: in the six months preceding the survey, almost three-quarters of them – versus half of

(7) In the survey by Liu (1992), 41.1% of urban men and 73.4% of rural men considered masturbation to be “bad”.

married men – earned less than 1,000 yuan per month (around 100 euro), and their mean income was 30% lower. The oldest single men have the lowest income, earning only half as much as married men of the same age (Table 4). Next, single men are, in general, less educated: one in ten (9.6%) are illiterate, versus 1.2% of married men ($\chi^2 = 86^{***}$). These differences are especially large for the oldest men, among whom the proportion with no education or only primary schooling is almost five times higher than among their married counterparts. On average, single men have attended school for two fewer years than other men, with 7.5 and 9.6 years of schooling, respectively. The average for the entire sample is 8.5 years, a level comparable to that of the county as a whole (8.1 years) in 2000 (Population Census Office, 2003). Single men above age 40 are by far the most disadvantaged in terms of schooling, with fewer than 6 years of education on average, almost 4 years fewer than married men of the same age.

Table 4. Income and educational level, China, JC county, 2008

	Single			Married		
	Age 27-39	Age 40+	Overall	Age 27-39	Age 40+	Overall
Number	203	160	363	124	134	258
Mean monthly income in the 6 months preceding the survey (yuan)	963.1	450.0	736.4	1,213.7	923.5	1,063.0
Student's <i>t</i> -statistic	9.01***		6.59***	3.82***		
Mean length of schooling (years)	8.8	5.8		7.5	9.6	9.5
Student's <i>t</i> -statistic	9.26***		8.38***	0.14 ^{n.s.}		
<i>Statistical significance:</i> ***: $p \leq 0.01$; **: $p \leq 0.05$; *: $p \leq 0.1$; non significant ^{n.s.} : $p > 0.1$. <i>Source:</i> Authors' survey.						

The single men interviewed in the survey are thus not only poorer and less educated than married men, but the majority (65.8%) agree that this disadvantaged situation is the main reason for their singlehood. This link between poverty and singlehood, which is not specific to China, is widely documented (Bourdieu, 1989; Contreras, 1989; Flandrin, 1975; Pagès, 2001). The low social and economic status of a section of the male population, in rural areas especially, is a recurrent determinant of singlehood, since women generally prefer men who are capable of offering them a higher standard of living. This is especially true in China, where marriage is traditionally a very costly affair for the groom (Johnson, 1983; Harrel, 1992), and where the shortage of local women – perceived as an obstacle to marriage by slightly more than one in four men (27.3% with $N = 621$), with no significant difference by age or marital status – further reinforces the propensity towards hypergamy.

In the villages studied in the late 1970s by Parish and White (1978), for example, bridewealth – the goods given to the bride’s family by that of the groom – already represented one year of family income. In most regions, the amount has since increased three- to ten-fold, often faster than the average income, and likewise for the cost of the ceremony, which has become an ostentatious display of the families’ material wealth. As a consequence, a portion of the male population, notably the poorest men and those in rural areas, are unable to marry. This has been regularly observed in other contemporary societies, including in China (Banister, 2004). At the national level (2000), fewer than 1% of Chinese men in the 40-49 age group with an educational level equivalent to high school or above are single, but among illiterate men the proportion climbs to 23% (Population Census Office, 2002).

Poverty, a factor of sexual exclusion

The sexual activity of the single men interviewed in the survey thus presents many specific features which are clearly linked to their marital and economic status. Yet they are far from forming a homogeneous group in terms of sexual practice.

Two groups emerge: single men who reported no sexual activity, and single men who engage in sexual activity and who are less active than married men,

Table 5. Numbers of single men who reported experience, or no experience, in their lifetime, of the three sexual practices detailed in the survey, China, JC county, 2008

	Has already had sexual intercourse							
	Yes		No					
Number	213		150					
Age 27-39	137		66					
Age 40+	76		84					
	Has already masturbated							
	Yes		No					
Number	109		104					
Age 27-39	81		56					
Age 40+	28		48					
	Has already watched a pornographic film							
	Yes		No		Yes		No	
Number	84		25		58		46	
Age 27-39	69		12		36		20	
Ag 40+	15		13		22		26	

Source: Authors’ survey.

but not always markedly so. Those who reported at least one sexual relation in the 12 months preceding the survey (N = 138) had slept with one more partner in their lifetime than married men (respectively 2.6 and 1.5), and had sexual relations 2.7 times per month on average (versus 4.1 for married men). They also more frequently reported having already masturbated (54.3% versus 36.9% for other single men, with $\chi^2 = 10.6^{***}$), and having already watched a pornographic film (71.7% versus 36.4% for other single men, with $\chi^2 = 43.7^{***}$).

The sexual behaviours of single men are diverse. At one extreme, there are 85 single men (23.4% of the sample) who have no experience of any of the three practices detailed in the survey (sexual intercourse, masturbation and pornography), and at the other extreme, 84 single men (23.1%) who have experienced all three (Table 5). What are the characteristics of these two “extreme” groups that may explain these differences in behaviour? Is access to sexuality determined by socioeconomic factors?

Table 6. Socioeconomic characteristics of the two “extreme” groups of single men, China, JC county, 2008

	Has no experience of any of the 3 sexual practices	Has experience of the 3 sexual practices
Number	85	84
Percentage of illiterates χ^2	22.4	3.6
	14.50***	
Mean length of schooling (years) Student's <i>t</i> -statistic	5.9	9.2
	5.96***	
Percentage of agricultural workers χ^2	28.2	6.0
	15.86***	
Percentage with an income below 1,000 yuan χ^2	85.9	47.7
	29.21***	
Mean monthly income (yuan) Student's <i>t</i> -statistic	508.8	1,059.5
	6.69***	
<i>Statistical significance:</i> ***: $p \leq 0.01$; **: $p \leq 0.05$; *: $p \leq 0.1$; non significant ^{n.s.} : $p > 0.1$		
<i>Source:</i> Authors' survey.		

A more detailed examination of the characteristics of these two “extreme” groups of single men shows that their socioeconomic situation, as proxied by our findings, is a key determinant of access to sexuality (Table 6). Single men with no experience of any of the three sexual practices are especially disadvantaged, in terms of both income and education: they have 3.3 fewer years of schooling, on average, than the most sexually active single men, and

their mean monthly income is 52% lower. By contrast, the characteristics of those with experience of all three practices – who are also much younger, with a median age of 31.6 years versus 44.6 years for the group with no experience – are closer to those of married men. Not only are the most socioeconomically disadvantaged men more often excluded from marriage than the others, but their access to sexuality is also more limited. The “age” factor is also important, since it is mainly older single men who are characterized by poverty and low educational capital. The fact remains, however, that the most socioeconomically disadvantaged single men are victims of this form of exclusion more often than the others.

Conclusion: Poverty, a double penalty

In JC county, poverty is thus a dual factor of exclusion. First, as observed in other societies, it excludes from marriage the poorest section of the male population. Although this is nothing new in China, the country’s economic reforms and the increasing cost of marriage for men have made the problem more acute. Second, the survey has shown that poverty may also be a cause of sexual exclusion; among single men as a whole, those with access to active sexuality are more socially advantaged than the others.

This “double penalty” imposed by poverty places the affected men in a situation of social discrimination. First, given the high value placed on marriage, strong family and social pressure is exerted on single men, in rural areas especially (Zhang and Zhong, 2005). In the survey, this pressure is felt by the majority of young single men (of whom 70% complain of family pressure and 57% of social pressure), but less so by older single men, whose chance of marrying declines over the years and whose families become resigned to the situation. Second, Chinese society offers practically no alternative to marriage, so opportunities for compensation are limited; a wide array of frustrations (sexual, emotional, familial, etc.) are expressed by a majority of single men.

A few single men make the most of the situation, however, and for them the social and moral prejudices governing non-marital sexuality may only be a minor obstacle, suggesting a less rigorous respect for tradition both within the younger generations and with respect to these generations. But for the majority of single men, the sentence is heavy: no money means no marriage, no cohabitation, no sexuality and no children. In this region of rural China, as in many others, being married or unmarried is still a defining feature of a man’s life.

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Li Shuzhuo, ZHANG Qunlin, YANG Xueyan, Isabelle ATTANÉ • MALE SINGLEHOOD, POVERTY AND SEXUALITY IN RURAL CHINA: AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY

In China, marriage is still a highly valued social norm, and until the 1990s, practically everyone was able to marry. The situation has changed, however, and a rising proportion of men, in rural areas especially, will experience prolonged and even permanent singlehood due to the growing shortage of women on the marriage market. In the cultural context of China, singlehood is a state of frustration, and even of deprivation, for which it is difficult to find socially acceptable compensations. The lives of single men may thus be severely affected by this situation. How, and to what extent, does unwanted singlehood shape their existence? Do they find alternative means to access a satisfactory sexual life? Are their socioeconomic characteristics different from those of married men?

The data analysed in this short paper are drawn from a survey conducted in 2008 in a rural county of Anhui province. Its dual objective was to achieve a better understanding of sexual behaviours in rural China in a context of strong social and political control. This study explores the link, well documented elsewhere, between singlehood and poverty, and shows that poverty is a dual factor of exclusion in this region of rural China. Not only does it exclude men from marriage, it also excludes the poorest single men from all sexual activity.

Li Shuzhuo, ZHANG Qunlin, YANG Xueyan, Isabelle ATTANÉ • CÉLIBAT, PAUVRETÉ ET SEXUALITÉ DES HOMMES EN CHINE RURALE : UNE ENQUÊTE EXPLORATOIRE

En Chine, le mariage reste socialement très valorisé. Pourtant, alors que jusqu'aux années 1990, presque toute la population parvenait à se marier, un célibat prolongé, voire définitif, va être de plus en plus souvent imposé à une partie des hommes, particulièrement en milieu rural, du fait d'un déficit croissant de femmes sur le marché matrimonial. Or, dans le contexte culturel qui est celui de la Chine, le célibat s'accompagne de frustrations, voire de privations, auxquelles il est difficile de trouver des compensations socialement acceptables. La vie des hommes célibataires est donc susceptible d'être fortement affectée par cette situation : comment et dans quelle mesure un célibat non choisi peut-il influencer leur vie ? Trouvent-ils des alternatives pour accéder notamment à une activité sexuelle satisfaisante ? Ont-ils des caractéristiques socioéconomiques différentes de celles des hommes mariés ?

Les données analysées dans cette note de recherche sont extraites d'une enquête menée en 2008 dans un district rural de l'Anhui, qui tente de répondre à un double objectif : mieux connaître les comportements sexuels en Chine rurale dans un contexte de contrôle social et politique important. Cette étude explore le lien, largement documenté par ailleurs, entre célibat et pauvreté, et montre que cette dernière constitue, dans cette région de Chine rurale, un double facteur d'exclusion. Non seulement la pauvreté exclut les hommes du mariage, mais elle exclut aussi les célibataires les plus pauvres de toute activité sexuelle.

Li Shuzhuo, ZHANG Qunlin, YANG Xueyan, Isabelle ATTANÉ • SOLTERÍA, POBREZA Y SEXUALIDAD EN LA CHINA RURAL : UNA ENCUESTA EXPLORATORIA.

En China, el matrimonio continúa siendo socialmente muy valorizado. Sin embargo, mientras que hasta los años 1990 casi toda la población conseguía casarse, una soltería prolongada, y quizá definitiva, va a imponerse cada vez más frecuentemente a una parte de los hombres, sobre todo en el campo, a causa de un déficit creciente de mujeres en el mercado matrimonial. Ahora bien, en el contexto cultural propio a la China, la soltería se acompaña de frustraciones, e incluso de privaciones, que son difíciles de compensar de manera socialmente aceptable. La vida de los hombres es pues susceptible de ser afectada fuertemente por esta situación : ¿Cómo y en qué medida una soltería forzosa puede influir en sus vidas? ¿Encontrarán alternativas para acceder, en particular, a una actividad sexual satisfactoria? ¿Se trata de hombres diferentes, por sus características socioeconómicas, de los hombres casados?

Los datos analizados provienen de una encuesta realizada en 2008 en un distrito rural de Anhui, con un doble objetivo : conocer mejor los comportamientos sexuales en la China rural en un contexto de fuerte control social y político.

Este estudio explora los lazos, ampliamente ya documentados en otros contextos, entre soltería y pobreza, y muestra que esta última constituye, en esta región de la China rural, un doble factor de exclusión. No sólo excluye a los hombres pobres del matrimonio, sino que también excluye a los solteros más pobres de toda actividad sexual.

Keywords: China, sexuality, male celibacy, poverty, rural area.

