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Rescuing Masculinity: Giving Gender in the Wake of China’s Marriage Squeeze

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Abstract
China’s marriage squeeze poses a profound challenge to the construction of masculinity in rural regions, where marriage continues to play an important role in the production of gender identities, marking manhood and its virtues. What are the consequences when men fail to marry and to assert respected male seniority? We show that in the context of China’s imbalanced sex ratio, family members attempt to rescue or restore the dignity of their sons and brothers by “giving gender,” gestures of care that are aimed to bolster gender authenticity and thereby strengthen a young man’s marriage prospects. By discussing both the intergenerational and intragenerational dynamics of gender collaboration within the family, we furthermore challenge existing studies that project gender antagonism in the wake of radical demographic change, while complicating the image of China’s rural bachelors as social outcasts.

Keywords
rural China, masculinity, gender, family, marriage

In contemporary China, as in other parts of the world, masculinity is intimately linked to marriage as a rite of passage, symbolizing the transition to male maturity.¹ Men who remain unmarried well beyond the legal marriage

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Age (22 years for men in China) and fail to move into gendered, age-based categories are typically classified as “abnormal,” “irresponsible,” or even “sick.” Their families, too, risk stigmatization.

China’s imbalanced sex ratio, as a consequence of nearly four decades of population planning and a persistent preference for sons, has resulted in a male marriage squeeze 婚姻挤压 that makes achieving marriage especially challenging, although not less desirable, for bachelors in rural regions. Rapid economic growth has gone hand in hand with deepening social inequality, exacerbating the practice of hypergamy: women seek to marry men who are more affluent and enjoy a high, preferably urban, status (Han, 2009; May, 2010; Obendiek, 2016). The purchase of a marital home 婚房 has become a prerequisite for a man to marry, significantly increasing the cost of marriage (Siu, 1993; Wu, Hu, and Chen, 2012; Glaeser et al., 2017). Marriage nonetheless continues to be vital for these men, as it allows them to assert a sense of dignity and masculinity that can serve as a counterpoint to the disgrace of their financially precarious situation and stigmatized status as peasants. How do Chinese families respond to the plight of rural bachelors?

China’s imbalanced sex ratio is typically painted as generative of social crisis, and the rural bachelor as emblematic of communal threat. Resonating with public prejudices against rural bachelors, scholars have raised the alarm in response to what some have dubbed a “bachelor crisis” 光棍危机 (Wan and Zheng, 2017). Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer (2004) depict rural bachelors as “kindling,” turning sparks of male aggression into violent flames with far-reaching societal implications. Some scholars project rising crime rates, an increase in prostitution, and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (e.g., Ebenstein and Jennings, 2009; Jiang and Li, 2009; Liu et al., 2014). The alleged surge in female trafficking has also been linked to the figure of the “bare branch” 光棍 or “old-age left-over man” 大龄剩男, as the rural bachelor is known in popular parlance in China (Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, 2013; Liu, 2015).

This body of literature suggests a growing gender antagonism. Our findings show, however, that the marriage squeeze equally gives rise to gender collaboration, especially in the family sphere. Demonstrating that female and male family members collectively work toward bolstering their son’s or brother’s masculinity—the qualities and attributes regarded as characteristic of, and indispensable to, Chinese men—thereby enhancing their chances of finding a marriage partner, we challenge the image of the rural bachelor’s relegation to the margins of society. Instead we show that parents and siblings join forces in an attempt to strengthen their son’s or brother’s marriage prospects. They do so by enhancing a man’s masculinity through what we refer to as “gender labor,” a concept introduced by Jane Ward and defined as “the affective and
bodily efforts invested in giving gender to others, or actively suspending self-focus in the service of helping others achieve the varied forms of gender recognition they long for” (2010: 237, emphasis in original). Situating gender labor in intimate relationships, Ward describes giving gender as emotional, physical, and sexual care-taking efforts.

Suowei Xiao (2011) employs the notion of gender labor in the Chinese context to show how the mistresses of wealthy married men—so-called second wives 二奶—boost their lovers’ gender authenticity through domestic, sexual, and other forms of affective labor. By doing so, they contribute to their lover’s negotiation of gender identity and his articulation of class privilege. Their (sexual) control over women is held to reflect and enhance men’s socioeconomic standing. Xiao revisits West and Zimmerman’s notion of “doing gender” (1987) to suggest that the production of gender identities in China is a collective rather than an individual process.

We seek to extend the notions of gender labor and giving gender in three ways. First, we show that gender subjectivities can also be produced through affective labor beyond romantic relationships. In rural China, the family provides an important basis for collective gender-giving within and across generations. Kin solidarity and support remain strong, despite the shifting dynamics of care following the reconfiguration of generational and gender relations (Choi and Peng, 2016; Harrell and Santos, 2017). In light of the rise of youth autonomy and “girl power” (Yan, 2006), rural young women in particular have become crucial providers of affective and material care, not only for their elderly parents, as some scholars have shown (e.g., Shi, 2017; Obendiek, 2017), but also, as we show, for their male siblings. Care flows along both the intergenerational and the intragenerational axis.

Second, giving gender is at once an altruistic and self-interested gesture of care that is directed not merely to the receiver but also to the other family members who have a stake in his marriage. When notions of selfhood are enmeshed in kin relations, agency cannot be uncoupled from the family. In other words, all family members engage as actively in their own self-making as in the self-making of significant others (Ko, 1999).

Third, we extend the range of forms through which giving gender manifests itself to include its material dimensions. Care can take many forms. An important form of care as part of giving gender is the transfer of wealth, which serves to boost the confidence and self-respect of young men in their effort to assert respected masculinity. Chinese masculinity is typically conceptualized through Kam Louie’s (2002) wen-wu dyad. Both wen 文 (cultural attainment) and wu 武 (physical prowess) represent masculine qualities and in most periods of imperial China wen predominated over wu. As masculinity has been redefined in response to domestic reforms and global influences,
wu, especially in the form of financial power and authority, often takes precedence (Osburg, 2013; Hird and Song, 2018). For young Chinese men from the countryside who lack wen qualities, wu becomes all the more important to prove that they can get by in China’s post-reform economy. In this context, financial contributions by family members, for instance toward the purchase of a marital home, serve to boost a man’s masculinity. Despite their transactional appearance, acts of giving or saving money for sons or brothers are intrinsically affectionate gestures that constitute the very foundation of kin solidarity (Judd, 2009). Indeed, material and affectionate, tangible and intangible dimensions of giving gender are deeply intertwined.

The notion of giving gender provides an insight into the shifting dynamics of care within rural Chinese families. It foregrounds the continuing importance of kin solidarity, within and across generations and genders, despite trying circumstances of economic hardship and the predicament of non-marriage. Even if family members reject the irresponsible life choices of their sons and brothers, they pursue ways to support them, as their status and well-being reflects on the dignity of the entire family. Giving gender, moreover, shows that gender identities are constructed collectively. The burden of gender labor is shared, especially within the intimate sphere of the natal family.

In this article, we draw on material we gathered as live-in researchers in rural families in Hubei (Willy Sier) and Guizhou (Miriam Driessen) that were grooming their adult sons for marriage.8 We used a combination of qualitative research methods, including participant observation, interviews, and discourse analysis of social and state media. Our research topic emerged by accident rather than by design, as did our collaboration.9 We were struck by the amount of time, resources, and emotional energy family members spent on enhancing the marriageability of male offspring, and the concerns that plagued them in the process. Although we have seen similar trends in other families in rural China, we do not have the quantitative data to show the prevalence of the phenomenon. We hope, then, that we can inspire other scholars to explore the topic further. In order to reveal the predicaments of these families, we have prioritized depth over breadth by painting the portraits of three men and their families. Each portrait presents a different scenario and perspective, illustrating how both men and family members respond to, and attempt to counter, their inability to achieve dignified male adulthood and marriage.10

**Portrait One: “Will Lin ever marry?”**

The marriage of her 27-year-old son kept Lin’s mother going in a life she described as “bitter.”11 She and her husband lived in a rented flat in Jingmen,
a prefecture-level city in central Hubei. Before moving to the city, the family resided in a small town about 80 kilometers south of Jingmen, when life turned awry. The family lost their little convenience store. The gambling habits of Lin’s father had eaten up the family’s savings, and Lin had struck up friendships with “bad people,” as his mother called them—rebellious and delinquent youths.

Lin was only sixteen years old when he was involved in a mugging that resulted in a five-year prison sentence. His mother was inconsolable. Disheartened and distressed, the family moved to Jingmen, where their daughter had entered high school. They labored assiduously to save up for a better future for their son. When Lin was released from prison, he joined his family in Jingmen. Everyone was elated to have him back, but also expressed concerns. By now, Lin had missed a vital stage of his youth. Due to his rocky history and the family’s financially precarious situation, Lin’s parents and sister were exceedingly worried about his future, and especially his prospects for marriage.

However, Lin managed to keep himself off the streets. Though quick-tempered, he was smart and sociable. He made a living through weishang 微商, a form of business conducted through the popular messaging application WeChat, by promoting products ranging from flashlights and swords to lucky phone numbers through his circle of virtual friends to potential customers. Meanwhile, Lin had moved out of his parents’ house and lived with friends. His parents were unaware of the particulars of Lin’s life, yet they wanted to know every single detail that might give them a spark of hope, especially any developments in their son’s romantic life. Lin knew this all too well and stayed quiet.

Rumor had it that Lin was seeing someone. His girlfriend was said to be a year older than he and was described as “quite good.” Lin’s mother had all her hopes set on this young woman and treasured the only tangible proof of her existence: a wallet still wrapped in gift paper, which she kept lovingly in a bedroom drawer. Her son had given her this wallet the year before after going on vacation with his girlfriend. It was a gift. Full of anticipation, the mother read this gesture as a strong indication of the woman’s earnest intentions. Yet after this symbolic moment, Lin never introduced his girlfriend. His mother was bursting to find out whether this woman and her son were still in a relationship, but nobody dared to raise this delicate issue.

For Lin’s mother, marrying off her children meant that she had succeeded in raising them. For her, marriage implied the reversal of generational duties. Before they married, she believed she was required to work for the well-being of her children as best as she could. After their marriage, the roles would be reversed. The idea of not marrying was preposterous in her eyes.
When she asked Willy Sier about her marriage plans, Sier explained that she was not sure if she wanted to get married, whereupon Lin’s mother replied, “My colleague’s daughter said that once, too. She told her mother that maybe she wouldn’t marry at all. My colleague responded, ‘You do that, and I’ll be lying in my grave with my eyes wide open!’”

Lin’s mother often broached the topic of marriage in heart-to-heart conversations with her daughter as they lounged on the bed until late in the evening. The wall next to the bed was graced with a large portrait of the daughter in a white wedding dress, sitting behind a piano; a photograph she had made to celebrate her high school graduation. Mother and daughter debated endlessly about what type of man the daughter should marry and weighed up the right age for her to do so. Marriage is all about timing. Lin’s mother explained that if her daughter waits too long, she might, like Lin, risk being “left over.” The focus of attention, however, was Lin.

The family’s preoccupation with Lin’s marriage stood in sharp contrast to Lin’s apparent disinterest in it. In the spring of 2016 Lin surprised his family with a request to borrow money for a down payment on a brand-new car, priced at CNY 120,000.12 His parents protested. His sister explained, “My mother first said he was crazy, because we’re trying to save up for a house.” But after much debate the family caved to Lin’s pressure and their love for him. Yet soon after the car was purchased, more drama ensued. Lin’s father was scammed when he tried to purchase insurance for the car, and only weeks after Lin bought the vehicle, it was stolen by one of his friends, who was arrested in possession of it. Meanwhile, the family continued to work around the clock to strengthen Lin’s position as a candidate for marriage.

Lin’s sister works at Foxconn in Wuhan for a little more than CNY 3,000 a month. She saves as much money as she can, partly as a back-up for her family and her unruly brother. She put aside CNY 10,000 during her first months of work to contribute to the purchase of Lin’s marital home. Lin’s father earns an irregular income as a carrier at a rice warehouse, where he loads and unloads trucks. He works extremely hard and is occasionally able to make over CNY 4,000 a month. Until recently, the mother was employed by a cotton mill, where she toiled 60 hours a week in the sweltering heat for CNY 2,000 a month. In April 2017, disaster struck. She broke her hip after being pushed to the ground by a cart at her workplace and was hospitalized. The lingering question became even more burning: “Will Lin ever marry?”

As this vignette shows, the role of Lin’s family members and the onerous gender labor they perform is complicated. Lin’s mother, who displays near unconditional dedication to the advancement of her son’s well-being and future, and his sister, who vows to contribute to her brother’s marital home and stands by if needed, at once challenge the gender norms that have been
central to the Chinese patriarchal family, and maintain them through unfail-
ing motherly and sisterly devotion.

Caving in to Lin’s outrageous request for money to buy an expensive car is a pertinent example of parental sacrifice for, and obedience to (male) off-
spring, reflecting a trend in rural China that Yan Yunxiang identifies as “descending familism”—a reversed form of filial piety in which “the trinity of the three generations adapts to a new and flexible form of family structure, family resources of all sorts flow downward, and, most important, the focus of the existential meanings of life has shifted from the ancestors to the grand-
children” (Yan, 2016: 245). Yet, the notion of descending familism and the idea that parents seek to win the hearts of their children (Yan, 2003: 181) conceals the importance of intragenerational forms of support.

Due to their upward mobility following educational advancement and migration to the city, daughters may be better positioned to provide financial support to family members than their parents or male siblings. As illustrated by the support of Lin’s sister, young women have in fact become important providers of care—emotional, material, and otherwise—to family members who are grappling to get by beyond their parents. They do not face the same pressure as men to prove their financial status and their savings can thus more easily be claimed as investments in their brothers’ futures. Notably, however, daughters like Lin’s sister give gender not just to support their brothers but also, if not more so, to relieve their parents from their burden of care. Just as gender labor is performed collectively, its burden is carried collectively.

The vignette shows that marriage in rural China is less about self-realiza-
tion than about “family-realization”—the fulfillment of the potential of the family as a whole. The actualization of the family entails the achievement of something that is desired or anticipated collectively and all members are expected to work toward achieving shared well-being. Yet the happiness and the respectability of the family continue to depend, at least in part, on the fate of the son, who not only is charged with continuing the family line but also represents the family (Watson, 1986; Fei, 1998). That his position lends the family pride and fulfillment explains why family members are invested in his success. Women and men gain meaning in the context of the family, and their well-being depends on their integration into the domestic group. This is why Chinese parents are said to be unable to find peace of mind, even beyond their death—as they “lie in their graves with their eyes wide open”—unless they witness their sons (and daughters) getting married. The whole family works toward a masculine ideal and suffers from the inability to achieve it.

Patrilineal descent continues to carry great force in rural China, yet it has undergone significant transformations. Stevan Harrell and Gonçalo Santos illuminate the paradoxes of the patriarchal family in China today. As the
“hierarchical system of domestic relations that includes multiple intersecting structures of inequality including gender and generational inequalities, among others” (Harrell and Santos, 2017: 10), patriarchy, they argue, has in many respects weakened. This is evidenced by important transformations such as the rise of premarital sex and cohabitation, the public display of affection, and increased gender equality. Yet in other respects, traditional elements of patriarchy continue to prevail, such as virilocal marriage and structures of gender and generational inequality (7).

The gender labor performed and the gender given by female siblings, such as Lin’s sister, present yet another paradox. On the one hand, these gestures of care symbolize gender equality, revealing women’s improved socioeconomic status and decision-making power. On the other hand, they signal continued gender inequality, for their contributions—cast in terms of dutiful “help” (Brown, 2017)—ultimately sustain the patriarchal model.

For one thing, giving gender demonstrates that masculinities are deeply embedded in family relations, as are the ways in which they are perceived and performed. Not only men’s understandings of their actions, as Matthew Gutmann (1997) demonstrates, but also women’s understandings of a man’s role in society, are mediated by stereotypes of local masculinities. Women, too, “embody” (in the metaphoric sense) locally hegemonic forms of manhood, and both men and women are involved in shaping what they deem to be positive forms of male identity for significant others. The role of women who fight against the loss of male dignity is, however, complicated and does not account for their own subordination in any simple way. Female respectability is intimately tied to that of their male family members, and vice versa. “Doing gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987) as part of the project of family realization is a collective process, as the gender being “done” is embedded in the relations that “do” it.

At first glance, gender labor chiefly consists of financial support; yet it is more than that. Family members go through endless hours of talking, deliberating, and trying to convince their sons and brothers to change their character and be more conscientious. They invest their knowledge, resources, and energy in helping them achieve Chinese masculine ideals of self-direction and confidence, combined with restraint and a sense of duty. The purchase of the marital home is a means to achieve a more important end. Home ownership exudes potency—sexual, financial, or otherwise—and boosts self-esteem. In remote rural regions, owning a marital home can radically change the fortunes of young men and, by extension, the whole family.

Family members’ investment in the son’s marriage condenses their existential worries about the future of the son, the family, and ultimately themselves. This speaks to the idea, put forward by Charlotte Bruckermann (2017),
that intimate care for others can further aspirations of selfhood. While giving gender implies the suspension of self-focus, it can also be a self-interested act. This is not to say that acts of giving gender as gestures of care do not involve conflicts between what is at stake for individuals and what is at stake for the family as a whole (see also Kleinman, 2010). On the contrary, caregiving can be burdensome, precisely because it requires self-sacrifice.

In recent years, Spring Festival celebrations in Lin’s family have repeatedly resulted in quarrels that lingered for months. After Chinese New Year in 2015, Lin’s sister refused to speak to her brother for an entire year. She reproached him for his irresponsible behavior, which increased the weight on their parents’ shoulders. Despite her exasperation, Lin’s sister continued to contribute her wage to his future marital home, seeing it as her duty to support the family as a whole.

Aside from the significance of marriage as a rite of passage to respectable adulthood and reputable familyhood, we believe that the precarious socio-economic situation of rural migrants at the margins of urban society contributes to the centrality of the family and to marriage as the prerequisite for establishing a family. Lin’s life and that of his parents are characterized by deep uncertainty. In the face of a still far from perfect healthcare system and the perceived lack of social security, for the older and younger generations the family functions as a node of support and stability. The search for security and the yearning for stability amid a rapidly urbanizing society in which many rural citizens still struggle to get by accounts for the sustained significance of marriage. Marriage promises to lay down roots in a world that is experienced as transient and insecure.

**Portrait Two: Rooting Masculinity**

Bin dropped out of primary school and regretted having done so when it was too late. In Guizhou, his native province, scores of youths escaped school and farm work to move to Guangdong, the coastal province that stood at the forefront of industrialization during the economic reform period, and take up work in the sweatshops and on the construction sites across the coastal region. When Bin was sixteen years old, he too started drifting. His first job was in a coal mine near his home village. He was filled with pride when he received his first pay. Even so, he gave the entire CNY 4,000 he had earned during the first few months to his older brother, who was the only student of his senior high that year who managed to enter university. In his late teens, Bin started venturing farther from home, first to Guangdong, then Fujian, Hubei, Jiangxi, and other places, returning every year for the Spring Festival.
More recently, Bin has faced trouble finding work that satisfies him. He stays home for longer stints to help his parents on the land. His mother urges him to get married, even more so than his older brother, who is unmarried too. His brother has a stable job and has demonstrated that he can look after himself. As the willful son who “does not listen,” Bin has been the primary source of concern. “How will you ever find a wife?” his mother cries now and then, chasing him with a broom through the house, laughing and shouting at the same time, admonishing her son to wash his dirty trousers and be more considerate and conscientious.

Yet female marriage candidates are few and far between. Bin is, like many of his peers, acutely aware of the marriage squeeze in rural Guizhou. He and his parents are afraid that their dilapidated family home, and the steep and slippery mountain trail that leads to it, will scare away potential marriage candidates. “Who wants someone with such a house?” Through the purchase of a house down the mountain, Bin’s parents hope to increase their son’s attractiveness and thus his marriage chances. During the lengthy discussions about marriage and marital homes that fill most evenings, especially when everyone is at home and food is plentiful in the period surrounding the Chinese Spring Festival, Bin remains on the sidelines, reflecting on his inability to contribute to the house and strengthen his position in the marriage market. “I’m poor,” he repeatedly offers with a wry smile. Bin’s elder brother, the only member of the family who has access to a mortgage, has been saving up for a house, confiding that he will never forget Bin’s financial support during his years at university and is prepared to help his brother where he can. He even went into serious debt when his younger brother lost a fortune in a pyramid scheme.

Being poor affects the reciprocal nature of friendship. Bin’s male companions seldom come to visit. One time they did come by. Wheezing and gasping for breath, they arrived at the open door and were welcomed into a comfortably warm room. The reason his friends climbed up the mountain that winter evening was that they wanted to set Bin up with one of the two young women they had brought along. During the evening, Bin and his male friends drank alcohol and played “fight the landlord,” a popular card game, while they neglected the young women, who sat quietly by the open fire, watching TV and snacking on candies fed by Bin’s mother, who was anxious to please them. Bin’s father remained outside the room, smoking at the fireplace in the kitchen. When the women pleaded to go home, they were ignored by their tipsy male company. Eventually the group left. “No feelings,” was Bin’s curt response to Miriam Driessen’s remark that the woman was really pretty.

Bin’s reply stood in stark contrast to his normally cheerful and amicable attitude. He tries to leave the house as much as possible, in contrast to his two
siblings, who rarely do so. His motorcycle lends him a great amount of freedom. His younger sister often jokes that he is similar to a *shamate* (a loanword that comes from the English word “smart”), a member of a Chinese subculture of young, uneducated rural migrants, who sport exuberant lifestyles and typically wear flamboyant clothes and have colored hairdos. Restless and rash at times, shamate are eager to flaunt their new wealth earned from migrant work in the city. In rural Guizhou, the shamate roars down potholed asphalt roads on his motorcycle with loud rock music or pop tunes blasting from the back and echoing through the peaceful valleys. Bin usually counters his sister’s comments with a grin. He often goes out to see his shamate friends, to the consternation of his mother, who prefers to see her son interacting with female peers. He knows this full well. When he leaves the house, he takes a quick glance in the pink hand mirror hanging outside from a nail in the wall, draws a comb through his hair, and shouts “I’m going to look for a wife!”

Certainly, part of the urgency behind settling Bin’s “marriage problem” is to keep him on the straight and narrow, preventing him from ending up in criminal circles. Both Lin and Bin personify the restlessness of male migrant youth. Venturing beyond the moral domain of the family and the familiar, these youths are seen as unscrupulous and untrustworthy, the worst of all marriage partners. By reincorporating them into the moral sphere of the family through marriage, it is expected, or at least hoped, they will turn into steady and principled men. These hopes speak of the transformative power that is attributed to marriage.

Bin’s own plans for the future veer between realism and idealism. While taking the water buffaloes to pasture, he fantasized: “What if there was a road leading up here? What if I had a million yuan? . . . I’d buy up and clear this place,” pointing to the fallow terraces on the mountain slope, “and start farming.” In the preceding year, he had saved next to nothing while working in Guiyang, Guizhou’s provincial capital, spending almost all his earnings on living expenses alone. Over the years Bin has become more modest. Seeing himself as a liability rather than an asset for his poor parents, he holds that he is in no position to dream.

In Bin’s case, the educated older brother performs gender labor in an attempt to enhance the marriage chances of his younger sibling, a gesture that is remarkable, given that he is effectively foregoing—at least temporarily—his own marriage prospects. As Bin readily acknowledges, given his weak position he cannot but accept his brother’s support. Rather than prompting antagonism between male siblings, as some scholars suggest (e.g., Tao, 2011), the predicament of rural bachelors can equally lead to collaboration among brothers. What, then, are Bin’s brother’s stakes in the marriage of his sibling?
For one thing, as the eldest son and the only family member with a stable income, he carries the weight of the whole family. For him, the poignant question is not whether he will help his brother, but where his gender labor will end. At the same time, Bin’s brother is anxious about failing to establish a family himself, and what started out as caregiving for others has partly become caregiving for himself. Finally, Bin’s brother’s support is an act of family-realization that he sees as benefiting the entire family. He will not only help his brother “find happiness,” as marriage is often framed in China, but also create peace of mind for his concerned parents, who are consumed by the failure of their sons to get married, laying the blame on their own poverty. Much like in the case of Lin’s sister, Bin’s brother’s act of giving gender, then, was directed to, and benefited, his parents as much as his brother.

This continued mutual support between the brothers demonstrates yet again the strong bond between siblings and the importance of intragenerational wealth transfers in rural China. Bin’s brother barely earns CNY 4,000 a month. Even though houses in the nearby village down in the valley cost over CNY 350,000, Bin’s brother is willing to come to the rescue. As mentioned, for him, supporting his brother equals supporting his parents and the entire family.

Individual family members are morally expected to commit to the advancement and well-being of the entire family. Happiness in China, as Charles Stafford shows (2015), does not just imply the emotional fulfillment of individuals; it is also linked to the prosperity and the pleasure of the family as a whole. In this process, much attention is paid to what other people feel or hope for, a process that Stafford terms “affective forecasting.” Happiness, as well as its pursuit, is therefore intrinsically relational and intergenerational (Stafford, 2015: 29). Being happy is closely related to what individuals are meant to be doing with their life as much as what they feel like doing (28). Marriage is viewed as a stage one ought to go through, or “a mission to accomplish,” as some interlocutors somewhat sarcastically phrased it, and is central to realizing family happiness. Marriage is therefore as much an act of self-development as a pursuit of family-realization, even if the advancement of the family requires personal costs and compromises. Giving gender, albeit at first glance limited to the economic realm, is thus very much an affectionate process that overcomes the supposed binary of self-making and other-making in an effort to advance the well-being of the entire family. Indeed, the material and emotional dimensions of boosting the masculinity of a family member are intertwined. Yet what type of masculinity did family members seek to cultivate in their sons and brothers?

The chasm between countryside and city with regard to income, security, and lifestyle has given birth to distinct types of masculinities. Before we go
into the subtle differences, we will look at the commonalities of rural and urban masculinities in China. Masculinity in rural and to a lesser extent urban China comprises two main attributes. The first is often referred to as “ability” 能力. Composed of the characters neng 能 (to be able) and li 力 (power), the notion of nengli combines economic success with sexual potency and is associated with masculinity in the realm of dating and marriage, even if the concept itself is gender-neutral (Farrer, 2002: 16). In a society where wealth has become an important marker of status, male potency is typically linked to a man’s economic standing (Osburg, 2013, 2016; Song and Hird, 2013).

Present-day Chinese masculinities intersect with processes of social stratification and class formation. Some scholars have argued that Chinese masculinities are premised on power rather than on sexual prowess (Song and Lee, 2010). Power, in turn, is predicated on affluence. Lower-class men’s lack of wealth is then associated with sexual impotency. Unlike in the West, where poor working-class men are viewed and feared as hypersexual, as opposed to their reputedly prudent middle and upper-class counterparts, hypersexuality in China is associated with the (new) rich, who commonly entertain one or more girlfriends alongside their spouses (Osburg, 2013; Xiao, 2011). Ridiculed as “having a problem down there,” poor men are seen as more likely to remain single and sexually inactive. This view fundamentally clashes with the popular portrayal of predatory rural bachelors in dire need of sexual gratification.

A second characteristic central to Chinese masculinity is, as we have shown, a strong sense of commitment vis-à-vis the family. A proper man places the family first. Furthermore, he is able to command respect. Ideal masculinity thus combines charisma with a strong sense of responsibility. This holds true for both rural and urban men. Nevertheless, there are slight differences in how masculinities are enacted in rural as opposed to urban settings. Whereas entrepreneurialism, audacity, smartness, and boldness in a quest for success are central to urban masculinities, rural masculinities maintain a certain reservation on this front. This is not surprising, given that men who are born and bred in the countryside are often compelled to compromise on ideal (urban) notions of masculinity, faced as they are by tensions between urban narratives of successful manhood that capitalize on financial power and the reality of their precarious position at the margins of urban society (Choi and Peng, 2016; Hu, 2016).

Preferred rural masculinities embody, apart from a sense of commitment, a proclivity for security and stability. A man’s ability to provide social, economic, and emotional security is a key quality of masculinities in rural China, where men are considered to be the providers and women the receivers of security. The conservative penchant of rural masculinities is not
surprising, given the eroding of the socioeconomic base of the village, not to speak of the frightening possibility of remaining single in the wake of the marriage squeeze.

**Portrait Three: Fear of Social Death**

The fear of social exclusion makes men and those who are invested in their marriage all the more anxious to rescue masculinity through giving gender. We have chosen to use the somewhat provocative phrase “rescuing masculinity” to capture the urgency, and at times despair, felt by those who seek to boost or restore the masculinity of significant others and save them from the stigma of non-marriage. Society is uncompromising. For men who are unable to cast off their bachelorhood and adhere to the “serial trinity” of birth, marriage, and death, marriage can mean exclusion and demise, rather than inclusion and life, as John Borneman (1996) has poignantly shown for those who decide against marriage. Their life course is cast as incomplete or deficient—and not just that. Rural bachelors risk social dismemberment when they are unsuccessful in claiming dignified male adulthood, especially when family members lose heart and cease making an effort to bolster their masculinity.

Lin’s elder cousin, Xi, provides a telling example. When Willy Sier was cordially introduced to Lin’s family members at a gathering during the Spring Festival in the maternal grandmother’s home, cousin Xi was insistently ignored. When Sier inquired about the man who sat quietly at a table watching others play mahjong, she was told brusquely: “Oh him, don’t mind him.” When she continued asking about him, it was explained why this cousin was considered not worth her attention. “He’s just a really bad son. He never married, doesn’t work, and is always unhappy,” snorted his cousin. In short, Xi, now 34 years old, was not worthy of attention. Somewhat timid and introverted, Xi kept to himself. His demeanor may have reflected his natural disposition, yet it was arguably influenced by the constant criticism from the extended family.

Living in with his mother, who suffers from heart disease, Xi reputedly “refuses to work,” as family members whisper. His extended family members view him as work-shy and irresponsible. These views speak to the performative quality of social categories of manhood and womanhood. Marriage is a process of active engagement with the social world (Masquelier, 2005). Non-marriage, then, indexes idleness and indolence, or worse, a lack of interest in others. As a result, men like Xi are often held accountable for their own alienation from the larger domestic group.

Xi’s extended family members carefully keep him at a distance, convinced as they are that “something is wrong with him.” Renounced and cast off as
imprudent and selfish, he is seen as a failure, or even a disgrace. Given the moral implications of failing to live up to masculine norms, Xi is not considered a filial son and thus a “real” man. What is more, given that marriage is an important marker of belonging, single men (and women) do not belong to anyone or anywhere. They are perceived as rootless. It is therefore not surprising that parents and siblings go to great lengths to prevent this scenario from happening by way of at times backbreaking gender labor.

“Xi is in his thirties and [comes] from a poor family. No girl would want to marry him,” his cousin explains. “People have given up on him, and he always blames his situation on his poor family. I think that we can’t choose our family background, but we can try to change ourselves.” This view resonates with the idea prevalent in contemporary China that one’s position in society reflects one’s ability and one’s ability alone, rather than unfortunate class origins, as was the case under Mao Zedong, or disadvantageous state policies. It construes the inability to find a spouse as a man’s own responsibility. Whether one is able to marry or marry well, then, depends first and foremost on one’s own ability. The general perception is that ultimately everyone can marry, if only they work hard for it. Of course, this idea conceals the gender labor and gender giving performed behind the scenes.

People have given up on Xi. We have heard others cast the fate of unmarried men and women in similar terms. What precisely does “being given up” mean? For one thing, this phrase suggests that people are aware of their commitment of giving gender to family members. To give up on someone indicates the limits of this form of care. It means that someone is deemed not worth investing in anymore. His next of kin have ceased trying to give gender and improve his standing and chances to get married, and perhaps direct their attention to someone else instead. In other words, social dismemberment can imply, even if it seldom does, the end of care. “What will happen to Cousin Xi when his mother can’t take care of him anymore? I really don’t know who’ll take care of him then,” mused his cousin once, indicating that without the support of one’s nuclear family, one is left to fend for oneself.

Xi’s story shows the uncompromising lot of unmarried men in rural China. The public image of the rural bachelor as a social outcast does not come out of nowhere. It is based on a fundamental reality. Yet even though they are mocked or despised for being irresponsible, men like Xi are never entirely left to their own devices. His mother, as long as she is capable of taking care of him, seems willing to do so; the same is true of his aunt. They make sure he is fed well and feeling well, and display affection through other everyday forms of care. Xi continues to take part in social gatherings and thus remains embedded in kin networks. The reality of rural bachelors’ marginalization is thus more complicated than cautionary tales of the alleged bachelor crisis
would lead us to believe. What is more, society is resilient. Single men and their families find numerous ways to counter their predicament.

Apart from marrying divorcées or widows, uxorilocal marriage, colloquially referred to as *daochamen* 倒插门, is another, if less common, solution for poor single men. By becoming a member of the wife’s family, a groom, in this reversal of Chinese practices, chooses to forego the continuation of his own family line in exchange for that of his spouse. Each of us encountered one such case in Hubei and Guizhou. In both cases, the unions were love marriages, yet the men in question were subject to whispered gossip. The stigmatization of uxorilocal marriage as anomalous effectively confirms the norm of patrilineal decent. Lin’s male cousin who “married out,” and had two children who carry the wife’s family name, was talked about as living in shame and held responsible for failing to continue the family line. Some men are willing to face social stigma in exchange for a fulfilling marriage and decide on this arrangement, which is ultimately viewed as more acceptable than remaining unmarried.

It is hard to overstate how pervasive the framing of rural bachelors as social outcasts and marginal figures is. Narratives are powerful. Since China’s sixth national census in 2010 unveiled the dimensions of the country’s imbalanced sex ratio, numerous narratives have been crafted around involuntary bachelors in rural regions, and variants of these stories have preoccupied scholars, journalists, policy makers, and by extension, the general audience. As Susan Greenhalgh (2013) convincingly shows, many of these narratives have taken on a life of their own to the extent that they influence scientific inquiry and public policy, and, no less important, we believe, the lives of rural bachelors themselves.

Rural men often adopt the very categories that society imposes on them (Driessen, 2018). Readily blaming themselves and their own lack of ability, they rarely hold others accountable. If they do, they do so in humorous ways. Men joked about a recent change in women’s attitudes, referring to better times in an undefined past when women were still wise and kind 贤惠 and, in line with their traditional roles, were subservient and diligent. “Women are really fickle 花心 these days,” Bin’s neighbor complained. He continued to lament the poor condition of his family home, which he saw as one of the main reasons he had not yet found a spouse. “What woman would want to eat bitterness in a place like this?” These self-deprecating words suggest, again, the direct association of economic poverty with non-marriage that is so central to public discourse on rural bachelors. Single men in Guizhou spoke of the marriage market as a “women’s market,” in which a minority of women are the demanding customers of men and set the terms and conditions for marriage. While men are expected to take the initiative, they feel they are at
the mercy of women. The self-mockery with which men talk about their situation stands in sharp contrast to their plight, especially when family members have given up on them.

To conclude on a more positive note, there are many poor bachelors who manage to live up to social expectations without the gender labor of their next of kin. In these cases, labor migration to the city or further afield is seen as a way to achieve respectable male adulthood. Through migration, young men are able to quickly earn enough money to cover the down payment or pay off the mortgage on a marital home. Yet migration, especially overseas migration, entails risks that not everyone wants, can, or dares to bear.

**Restoring Masculinity**

Marriage in rural China is a family affair that is as much about self-realization as about the fulfillment of the potential of the family as a whole. Since the respectability of the family depends in part on the respectability of the son or sons who are charged with the duty of continuing the family line and securing the well-being of the family, the entire household is invested in their marriage. Non-marriage, as a consequence, is a collective problem. In this article we have explored how the family responds to men who fail, at least temporarily, to find a marriage partner.

Chinese family members, as we have seen, may opt to join forces and pool resources in order to enhance the marriageability of their sons and brothers. They do so through giving gender—a form of affective labor carried out within the intimate sphere of the natal family in order to help significant others achieve the gender recognition they long for or are held to lack by others. By demonstrating forms of collaboration within and across generations and between and among genders, we do not seek to refute or rule out the existence of antagonism within the family. Certainly, efforts to enhance the marriageability of a son put pressure on already limited resources and divert attention from other, equally deserving, family members. Nonetheless, rural families collectively aim to cope with and try to overcome involuntary bachelorhood.

Gender labor and giving gender are very important in rural families with limited means. Sons of these families not only face the odds of a shortage of marriageable women but also struggle with their relative poverty and rural background in a status-conscious society that continues to favor affluence and the urban in myriad ways. Many of these men yearn for security, as do their families. Rural lives are characterized by uncertainty and the family serves as a node of support for both the older and younger generations, even if its members are physically separated due to migration. Marriage promises to lay down roots in a world that is experienced as transient and insecure. At
the same time, it allows young men to assert a sense of respectable manhood that functions as a counterpoint to the disgrace of their financially precarious situation and status as peasants.

By their determined efforts geared toward strengthening their sons’ and brothers’ position in the marriage market, members of rural families display tremendous resilience. Giving gender often takes the form of providing money for the financing of the marital home. Homeownership is held to increase a man’s virility and social status, and thus strengthens his position in the marriage market. Giving gender also entails the endless talking, convincing, and coaxing by family members with an eye to changing the attitude and conduct of male offspring and making them more conscientious and responsible—features associated with the Chinese masculine ideal. Regardless of whether gender labor leads to marriage or not, rural bachelors remain entangled in networks of kin and community relations. The care they receive from others defies their supposed relegation to the margins of society.

How does the concept of “giving gender” contribute to gaining a better understanding of rural families in China today? First, it reveals the intricate dynamics of care within the Chinese patriarchal family and the persistent centrality of kin support and solidarity, which revolves around the intergenerational as well as intragenerational axis. Second, it shows that the construction of gender identity is a collective process, especially when the person in question—in this case the son or bother—fails to live up to the established norms of gendered identity. Indeed, gender subjectivities are harnessed collectively, as is the achievement of gender ideals. Occasionally, family members may admit defeat and disassociate themselves from unmarried men, rejecting their irresponsible life choices and their failure to become respected men. Yet since this failure reflects on the dignity of the entire family, they first rally to rescue masculinity.

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**Notes**

1. Scholars who have written about marriage as a rite of passage to seniority include, among others, Elisabeth Croll (1995), Margery Wolf (1985), and Lisa Rofel (2007). Matthew Kohrman (2000) has examined the centrality of marriage to identity formation.

2. Both Chinese men and women are often labeled “abnormal” 不正常, “irresponsible” 不责任, and “sick” 有病 when they approach or have crossed the infamous threshold 坎, after which family members give up looking for marriage partners for their sons, daughters, and cousins.

3. There are more factors that have contributed to the imbalanced sex ratio. Apart from family planning and the continued preference for sons, the spread of sex determination sonography, the accessibility of abortion, and gender-biased population policies have all contributed to China’s marriage squeeze (Murphy, 2003). Furthermore, Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) show that population planning in China has a much longer history.

4. As Liu Yanwu (2011) rightly observes, there are different types of bachelors. Liu distinguishes four. The first type is a result of historical circumstances. The second is the bachelor with disabilities. The third remains single due to economic hardship; the fourth due to coincidence. Liu speaks of a double marriage squeeze caused by imbalanced sex ratios in combination with a materialist mind-set and the trend toward hypergamy. Xing Chengju (2011) shows that there are regional differences when it comes to the causes of involuntary bachelorhood.

5. A large body of scholarship exists on China’s imbalanced sex ratio and its causes and consequences. Leading scholars on the subject include Li Shuzhuo, Isabelle Attané, Jiang Quanbao, and Marcus Feldman (e.g., Attané and Gu, 2013; Das Gupta and Li, 1999; Jiang and Li, 2009; Xie, 2013). In anthropology, Susan Greenhalgh has made a major contribution to the field (e.g., Greenhalgh, 2013; Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005).

6. *Guanggun* 光棍 is a gender-neutral term (as in, for instance, *guanggunjie* 光棍节, “single’s day”). However, in rural China it often connotes a male bachelor.

7. Ward (2010) takes femme/female-to-male sexual relationships as a point of departure to consider gender as a form of labor that can be performed by others. She explores the work that women do in intimate relationships with transgendered men, especially the “gender labor” they perform with an eye to validating and celebrating their partner’s masculinity. She argues that this concept can be extended to heterosexual relationships, as “all people both give and require gender labor” (239).

9. Sier studied the educational mobility of rural youth in China and the lives of rural university graduates. Driessen carried out research on the intersection of migration and housing, with a focus on the marital home.

10. As female researchers, we regrettably had reservations about addressing topics such as sexual intimacy and sexual desire in interviews and conversations with male interlocutors. Men themselves did not raise these issues either. Hence, we focus on male identity construction in relation to marriage, although we realize that sexuality is an important part of male identity (see, e.g., Louie, 2002: 6–7).

11. To protect the privacy of our interlocutors we use pseudonyms throughout the article.

12. One Chinese yuan (CNY) equaled 0.11 British pounds (GBP), as of May 2017.

13. In Guizhou, many youths drop out of compulsory education, that is, the first nine years of primary and middle school. Wu Jinting explains in Fabricating an Educational Miracle (2018) that many Guizhou families are disenchanted with the Chinese education system and that statistics regarding school enrollment in the province are falsified to pacify higher authorities.

14. Whereas men and their parents in rural Hubei frequently complain about how troublesome it has become to find a marriage partner owing to the excessive bridewealth requests, men and their parents in rural Guizhou were acutely aware of the marriage squeeze. In Guizhou, the proportion of bachelors between the ages of 30 and 39 years is projected to exceed 50 percent in all but one prefecture by 2050 (Sharygin, Ebenstein, and Das Gupta, 2013). Even if these figures are somewhat exaggerated—a number of variables have not been factored in, such as intra-provincial and overseas migration, the prevalence of unregistered women, or the recent relaxation of family planning policies—they point at a problem that is by now widely acknowledged. Whereas the angst fueled by prospects of remaining unmarried may be less intense in Hubei, the predicaments faced by men and the family members invested in their marriage are remarkably similar.

15. Daochamen 倒插门 is also referred to as ruzhui hunyin 入赘婚姻 and shangmen nüxu 上门女婿.

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