



PODCAST

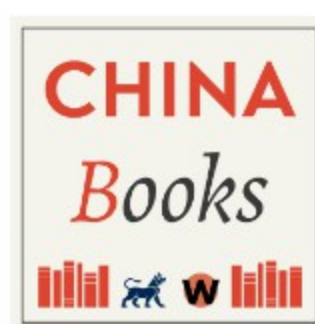
Ep. 4: How ‘Leftover Women’ Reshape China

Educated, unmarried Chinese women have been dubbed “leftovers” by the state, who want them to focus on having children. Their independence is transforming China’s demographics and society.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD — JANUARY 2, 2024

POLITICS

SOCIETY

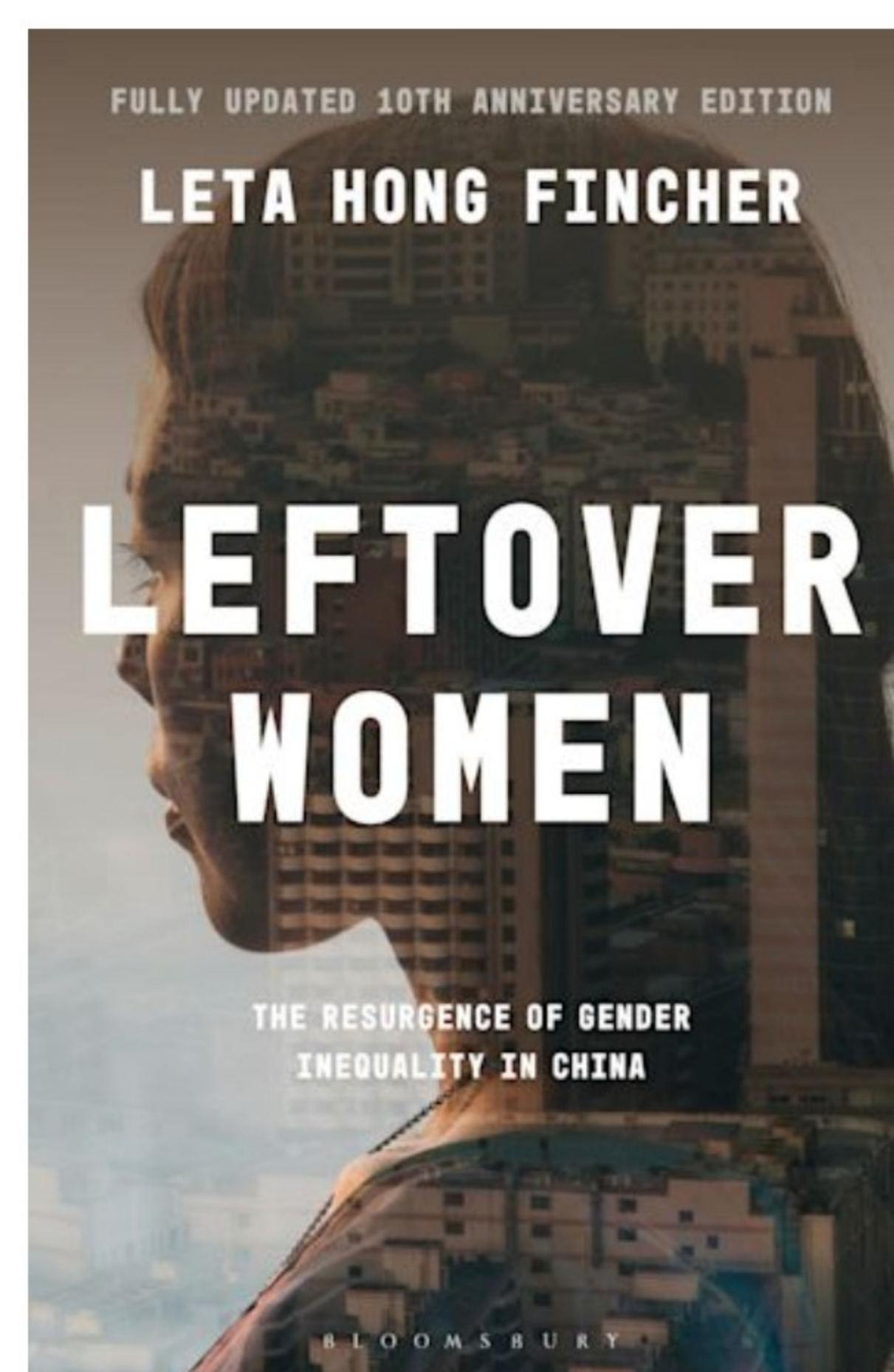


Subscribe to the China Books podcast on your favorite platform, including [Apple Podcasts](#) and [Spotify](#). You can also listen to all [past episodes](#) here at the China Books Review, where a new episode lands on the first Tuesday of each month.

At the height of China’s economic boom in 2007, as more Chinese women were getting college degrees and promising careers, the government launched a propaganda [campaign](#) urging women to get married young, before they became “yellowed pearls.” The scholar Leta Hong-Fincher captured that phenomenon in her 2014 book [Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China](#), now re-released in an updated 10th anniversary edition. In this episode of the China Books podcast, she talks about why China’s Communist Party leaders are still so focused on micro-managing the personal lives of women.

President Xi Jinping himself made an explicit [appeal](#) at China’s National Women’s Congress in November 2023, calling on China’s women to stay home and have babies. The draconian one-child policy, enforced from 1980 to 2016, had led to a plummeting birthrate, a contracting workforce and an aging population. Now the government is urging women to marry early and have three children.

But many of China’s women (about one in five now have college degrees) seem none too keen on giving up on their careers, finding more independence on their own than they would in a marriage. China’s fertility rate continues to [plummet](#), and is now about half the replacement rate. The number of marriage licenses granted per year in China has [dropped](#) for nine straight years, and is now half of what it was a decade ago. Faced with inequality of opportunity — and of legal protection when it comes to marriage, property rights and domestic abuse — women in China are engaged in a demographic revolution, voting with their feet, with profound implications for China’s economic and political future:



[Buy the book >](#)



China Books

Ep. 4: How "Leftover Women" may reshape Ch

00:00 | 47:29

Guest



Leta Hong Fincher is the author of *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (2023, 10th anniversary edition) and *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (2018). She is the first American to receive a Ph.D. from Tsinghua University's Department of Sociology in Beijing, and is currently a Research Associate at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University.

Transcript

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Here are a couple of startling facts. One, China's fertility rate has been plummeting, and is [now at about half the replacement rate](#). And two, the number of new marriages registered each year in China is now about half what it was a decade ago.

Behind these facts is a world of individual decisions, made by Chinese women who are increasingly well-educated, urban, and interested in having careers and making their own decisions about their lives.

And yet, here's one more startling fact. The percentage of women working in China has dropped over the past three decades of China's galloping economic growth – from 73 percent in 1990, to just over 60 percent in the 2020s. And parenthetically, is still higher than female workforce participation in the United States.

If this sounds contradictory – it's more that it's complicated. It's still true that most women in China work. Some choose to be full-time wives and mothers. And some buckle to pressure from parents, bosses, and the government.

China's ruling Communist Party has tried, over time, to shape the size and quality of China's population, from Mao Zedong in the 1950s encouraging women to have big families, to the draconian one-child policy from 1979 to 2016.

Now, the Party faces unintended consequences of its own making – 30 million more men in the younger generations than women, a shrinking workforce, and a shrinking and aging population.

The Party's reflexive response is to step in again, at the expense of Chinese women's status and rights, to engineer the kind of population the Party feels that China needs. What could possibly go wrong?

(Music up)

01:57: This is the China Books podcast, a companion of the China Books Review, co-published by The Wire China and Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations. I'm Mary Kay Magistad.

(Music under)

Mao Zedong used to say that women hold up half the sky. And that was refreshing for many Chinese women to hear, after centuries of Chinese women being kept illiterate and subordinate. But – give credit where it's due – female literacy has increased to about 99 percent under Communist Party rule. Women are now the majority in undergraduate and Master's degree programs around China, and roughly one in five Chinese women now has a university degree.

02:30: All this has helped fuel China's extraordinary economic rise over the past four decades, which in turn drove more rural Chinese into cities, to work their way into better lives. When China's market reforms started in 1979, just one in five Chinese people lived in cities. Now, it's two-thirds. And that whole era coincided with the one-child policy, when most urban families were allowed to have just one child. Over time, in cities, the one-child family became the norm, and many parents poured their resources, hopes, and dreams into their one child, boy or girl.

And then, the one-child generation started to come of age, and consider their options like no Chinese generation before, including whether they really wanted to marry, or become parents.

Starting in 2007, China's state-owned media started pushing out the idea that young women better hurry up and get married, because by age 27, they'd be washed up, and no man would want these so-called "leftover women."

That question caught the attention of my guest on this episode, Leta Hong Fincher, a former China correspondent who was then doing a sociology PhD, in Chinese, at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

03:56: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** And so I was taking classes, and one of the classes I took was The Sociology of Work. And our final paper was a mini ethnography of workers. And I chose to do a mini ethnography of real estate agents. And so I was observing real estate agents at their work, and then I was also talking to a lot of them. And this is when I first heard from one young woman who was a real estate agent, and she was telling me that she was engaged to be married. And she herself had just used all of her life savings and handed it over to her fiancé – they hadn't even married yet – to fund the purchase of a marital home, but the home deed only had her fiancé's name on it. And I thought, "okay, wait a minute, you seem like somebody who's really, really intelligent. Why are you doing this?"

04:56: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** One of the reasons was that young women at that time were seeing and hearing messaging like what appeared in a column from the state-run news agency Xinhua. The headline was: *Do Leftover Women Really Deserve Our Sympathy?* Here's one excerpt: "Pretty girls don't need a lot of education to marry into a rich and powerful family. But girls with an average or ugly appearance will find it difficult. These kind of girls hope to further their education in order to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is, they don't realize that as women age, they are worth less and less. So by the time they get their MA or PhD., they are already old, like yellowed pearls." Leta started looking into where this term, "leftover women" came from, and traced it to China's Ministry of Education and the All-China Women's Federation.

05:50: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** Then I also looked and discovered that actually China's State Council came out with this really important so-called population decision – and this was in 2007, it was right before this deluge of propaganda about "leftover women" – saying that China has a very urgent problem of low, quote unquote, low population quality, that because China's population quality is too low, China's going to have a severe problem competing in the international market in the future as the workforce...

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And low quality meaning what?

LETA HONG-FINCHER: Low quality, okay, so this is the concept of *su zhi*. It's a little hard to translate because it refers not just to levels of education, but kind of the level of culture and upbringing and grooming, and it's a term that is very heavily used in Chinese government documents about how – well, in fact, the use of eugenics, optimizing population, *yusheng youyu*, optimizing births and optimizing the population quality. All of these notions were much more explicitly propagated several decades ago. I think in recent years, the Chinese government has realized that "well, we don't want to so explicitly use the term eugenics anymore." But there's a very strong strain of this that relates to China's whole population engineering program.

07:26: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** At the time Leta was doing her research, interviewing dozens of urban women between 2011 and 2013, China's fertility rate had already been below the replacement rate for 20 years. In other words, fewer Chinese were being born, than were needed to replace those who were dying. Some Chinese demographers, even then, were predicting that China's population would soon level out and then shrink. One told me, rather matter-of-factly, back then, that China's population could shrink to half its current size by the end of this century. I was floored at the time, but now [other demographers, both in and outside China, are saying the same thing.](#)

This *could* pose a challenge for China's continued economic growth, on which the Party has long staked its legitimacy. It could be a strong incentive for the Party to try to turn things around – even if it comes at the expense of all the Party had promised women over time.

Leta Hong-Fincher addresses all of this in her book *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, which originally came out in 2014, with a Chinese language version published within China in 2016. A new, updated 10-year anniversary edition is now available, with the last decade's data on marriage and birth trends having shown that the original edition was prescient. Leta also wrote the book *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China*, which looks at how the Party has tried to push back, as increasing numbers of Chinese women demand rights and respect, and reject pressure to give up their careers in order to marry and have babies. Here's the rest of our conversation, starting with some historical context of how China's Communist Party moved from being champions of women's rights – to something else.

(Transitional music)

09:21: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So women in traditional Chinese culture didn't have a whole lot of rights or status in society. Foot binding was only outlawed in 1912. The Communist Party used the promise of more rights for women to get them to support the Party's efforts to come to power. And when the Party finally did come to power in 1949, it banned polygamy, which up until then was widely practiced in China, at least among certain classes. In the People's Republic of China's first constitution, which was put together in 1954, they said in Article 96: "Women in the People's Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of political, economic, cultural, social, and domestic life." The current constitution has the same clause. And yet Xi Jinping gave a speech at the National Women's Conference in November 2023, basically advocating for women to stay at home and have babies. And he made no mention of women at work. So what happened? Why the gap between talking the talk and walking the walk?

10:30: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** Well, I mean, there has been this gap for many decades, actually. And yes, this was the first time that Xi Jinping so explicitly said, effectively, women have to return to the home. We need to focus on marriage and childbearing. But really, this is kind of a long-term trend that kind of started with the onset of market reforms. And in fact, I just finished teaching a course for the first time that I designed on transnational feminisms, China and beyond. And so we were looking comparatively around the world at Communist revolutions around the world. And I was learning, really for the first time, just how feminist China's Communist revolution was. It was unique among the global Communist revolutions. It was partly because it came after the overthrow of the Qing Empire and the May 4th movement, which also really emphasized gender and women's liberation, getting away from the traditional Confucian feudal norms about the subjugation of women. So this was very important. And of course, Mao's most famous saying practically was women hold up half the sky, in the early Communist era. But then with the onset of market reforms, you started to see...

11:45: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Well, wait, before we get to market reforms, do you think they meant it?

LETA HONG-FINCHER: I think a lot of them meant it. In fact, believe it or not, even Mao Zedong himself, when he was very young in 1919, wrote a series of essays about the suicide of a young woman called Miss Dao, who was forced into an arranged marriage. And actually, when you go back and read that essay, it's pretty stunning in its embrace of feminist beliefs.

And in fact, yes, quite a few of the male Chinese Communists at the time, in the 1920s, were really supportive of women's rights. And a lot of the women who joined the Communist revolution early on, in the 1920s, they joined not so much out of a belief in communism, but because they wanted to escape their families. They didn't want to be pushed into an arranged marriage. And so, the history of feminism is actually really rich in China. So, yes, I really think that it went beyond mere rhetoric in the early years of the revolution. But then of course, once the Chinese Communist Party deviated from the Marxist ideal of, you know, a revolution of the proletariat in the cities and made it more of a peasant-based revolution, then it became more patriarchal. And then the Chinese Communist revolutionaries, who were male, kind of rolled back their earlier commitment to feminism because they wanted to placate all those very patriarchal, male-headed houses in the countryside.

13:27: So by the time you got to 1949, I mean, there is a range of opinions about how sincere the Communist Party was in its devotion, professed devotion, to gender equality. But I think that there's no question that there were many Communist Party officials, a lot of them were women in the All-China Women's Federation, but there were also Communist men who did actually believe in the principle of gender equality. It's not something to be sneezed at, either that China did have practically the world's highest rate of female labor force participation for decades in the early Communist era. And I mean, women still had to assume, you know, the double burden of primarily taking care of the household and taking care of the babies and all of this. Did women have true equality with men? Of course not. I mean, that's never really been achieved anywhere worldwide. But I think actually that it goes beyond mere rhetoric in the early Communist era, especially economically.

And of course, it was imperative for the Communist Party at the time to build this new nation, to increase its industrial output. They thought it was very important for all women to take part in working, assigning women jobs in the cities and the countryside. This was kind of common to Communist revolutions around the world. But it was that the early years of the revolution in China that were strikingly feminist and idealistic.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Previous generations of women in your family grew up in China. Have you thought about that?

15:17: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** Actually, my grandparents moved to Vietnam when they were very young. My mother was born in Vietnam, and so it was really an ancestral link back to China.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: But you know the conditions that your great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother would have been living in in China.

15:37: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** Yes, you know, those were very traditional Confucian times where women were certainly not taken as seriously as men, I mean, my grandmother and my other female relatives from my grandparents' generation, the women didn't really get proper names. They were just called numbers. My grandmother also, she wasn't illiterate but she didn't really get – and I think this was pretty common of her generation – didn't get a proper education. In fact, it was very accepted for men of my grandparent's generation to have more than one wife, maybe not official wife, but my grandfather had a whole other family. And of course the Communist Party outlawed polygamy and made divorce an option for women.

I actually take the whole gender revolution of the Communist revolution in China quite seriously. I think that even if you're just talking about the rhetoric and the ideals that they put forth, that a lot of women really recall those days with fondness, because it was a real liberation. I think that there were some real dramatic leaps for women's rights in China at the time that meant things to people. There's this very strong feminist legacy that is alive today. And that contributes and feeds into a new rebirth of feminist activism among young Chinese today in fact.

17:21: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So I wonder then, do you think the Party is kind of a victim of its own success, or at least of unintended consequences, in that there is almost universal female literacy in China. Millions, tens of millions of Chinese women now have college degrees. Hundreds of millions are in the workforce. And all of this broadens their experience and worldview, and sense of themselves and their choices and rights. They grew up with this rhetoric that women hold up half the sky. And they grew up with a reality

that there actually was room for them in the workplace and in the world.

17:57: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** Well, I would put it differently. I would not be the least bit surprised if Xi Jinping personally feels, “oh, my God, I wish we hadn’t had that gender revolution. I mean, why?” But it’s because of women’s liberation, the unprecedented levels of education for women in China, that China had this economic revolution too. I mean, there’s no way that China’s economic growth rates would have been so spectacularly high for decades, were it not for the emancipation of women and the emphasis on women’s education and girls’ education.

And of course, those trends coexisted with this incredibly stubborn persistence of very patriarchal norms. But there’s no question that because the Communist propaganda about women’s emancipation, all the way up until the end of the 1970s, all of these Communist propaganda and slogans said things like, “have a late marriage and late childbirth for the country. This is good for China’s economic development, for women to delay marriage and delay childbirth.”

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Because it gave them more time to work?

19:22: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** Yes, absolutely. If you look at the propaganda images starting from 1949, all the way through the end of the 1970s, images of really strong, muscular, rosy cheeked women in these incredibly traditional male workers’ roles, like being an electrical welder, driving a tractor. And the message is that, yes, women need to work longer. They need to contribute to China’s industrial development by working more.

And so, of course, the end of the 1970s coincided with the onset of market reforms, and that’s when inequality started to come back, as the government began to dismantle the planned economy. They stopped assigning jobs automatically to all women. They stopped assigning managerial jobs to women. Free market elements reintroduced a lot of these traditional norms about gender. And you had a lot more gender discrimination as employers were more free to make their own hiring decisions. At the end of the 1980s, you started to see some Communist Party officials and academics talking about how it’s important for women to return to the home, because with higher unemployment rates at the time, with market reforms, it was believed that when there’s unemployment, then we need to have those jobs go to men rather than women.

21:05: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** When we were both correspondents in China in the late ‘90s, some women factory workers were being required to retire, quote unquote, at age 45, whereas the man could stay until 55 or later.

LETA HONG-FINCHER: Absolutely. So that’s when, in the 1990s, you started to have this, like, dismantling of the state-owned enterprises, the restructuring of the state-owned enterprises, and women workers were the first to be laid off. And a lot of them lost their jobs, or retired, as you said, at age 45. So, this is a long time in coming, this resurgence of gender inequality. It’s taken several decades, really. And now it’s getting sharper.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And another element of it, again, starting in the ‘90s, maybe it started before that, but I think it became more prominent in the ‘90s and early 2000s, was companies sort of unabashedly advertising that they wanted a woman who looked a certain way, was a certain height and weight, a certain age, and unmarried. I mean, that would be the preference. And that was allowed. It was allowed to advertise like that.

22:13: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** *(Laughs)* On paper, there was a law introduced in China saying that it is no longer legal for companies to make those kinds of blatantly discriminatory ads. But you still see that all the time. And even if you don’t see it explicitly, first of all, you still do see job ads that are violating Chinese law. And they still explicitly are calling for men over women.

But even if you don’t see it as much explicitly, there is again, so much research documenting this really blatant gender discrimination in hiring, where employers will routinely ask women who are interviewing for jobs, when, if they’re not married already, “when are you planning to get married?” Or if they’re married, “So when are you having your first child? Have you had your second child?” Now it’s a three-child policy. There’s an enormous amount of gender discrimination. It’s very open in fact. And of course China doesn’t really have true rule of law. So a lot of these laws on the books are just there for window dressing.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: So something that puzzles me is, going back to Xi Jinping’s speech saying that women should basically go home and have babies, China’s workforce has been contracting for several years. The population is now contracting. If you’re going to not encourage half of the population to be part of the workforce, how does that work? I mean, if China’s leaders want the country to continue to have good economic growth, what kind of future do you think they’re imagining?

24:00: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** Well, you know, this is an excellent question, one that I have been asking myself for many years. Clearly, economic development is not the number one goal anymore, especially under Xi Jinping. And moreover, this was a trend that was happening even before he came to power. Because I write about the propaganda campaign surrounding so-called leftover women that emerged in 2007, really. That was a huge, big propaganda push to get these single educated women to marry and have a baby and to push them into the home.

So you contrast that with surrounding countries like Japan and South Korea for example. And in fact Japan, is a really good counterexample, because Japan had very, very low rates of female labor force participation. And the Japanese government, especially under Shinzo Abe, recognized the low rate of female labor force

participation in Japan is bad for Japan's economic development. And so they introduced this so-called womenomics policy that actually was successful to some extent. I mean, obviously Japan could do more, but the female labor force participation rate has increased pretty significantly in Japan. And you even see language about this in South Korea, which is also very heavily patriarchal.

But China? You just haven't seen that in China. This is where it's politics in command. It's not economics in command.

25:38: Years ago, when I wrote my second book, *Betraying Big Brother, The Feminist Awakening in China*, I was looking at all of the evidence and the brutal crackdown on feminist activism, for example, the resurgence of gender inequality. And I really believe that basically the subjugation of women in all these different ways is really central to the Communist Party's authoritarian control of the entire population.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: How so?

LETA HONG-FINCHER: Marriage per se is seen as a politically very stabilizing institution. The Communist Party sees it as helping to address one of the problems with this extreme sex ratio imbalance where today you have about 30 million more men than women. And so there's a lot of propaganda about how all these millions of men, especially in the countryside, that are really disgruntled, they've become really violent, they pose a major risk to political or social stability. And it's very important to get those men married. And so that's one area. Another area that's very important is this epidemic of domestic violence in China. There are conflicting trends here because the government passed this really landmark anti-domestic violence law at the end of 2015. It was a legal milestone. But this law has simply not been enforced. I mean, it's virtually impossible for women who are the vast majority of violence victims within marriages, within intimate partner relationships. It's virtually impossible for women to get a restraining order.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Because?

27:28: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** Well, this is the thing. Why doesn't the government enforce it? And I personally believe there's a lot of evidence to indicate that this goes back to the Communist Party simply not only not caring – it doesn't care about widespread violence against women – I think, in many ways, it sees private violence against women as containing all of the extreme discontent of men, and you're allowing the men to just get away with beating up their partners. I mean, you just see it time and time again. These violent men who even murder their intimate partners, they're almost never punished for it. And it's become a lot more difficult for women to get a divorce, even when the men are proven to have committed egregious acts of violence against their wives or their intimate partners.

In fact, Ethan Michelson, who's a sociologist, came out with a book recently called *Decoupling* that analyzed tens of thousands of divorce trials across China. And it's really pretty staggering evidence, showing that these judges had clearly been instructed to just deny women applying for divorce from their abusive partners, just deny their applications. And so basically, if you're a woman filing for a divorce, and you make it all the way to court, which is a big thing because you have to get through all these hoops to get your case heard before a judge. The judge simply completely disregards a lot of evidence of domestic violence. Why is this? It's just politically stabilizing. Then you're less likely to have, you know, angry men in the streets. You know, demanding the downfall of the Communist Party. And this is part of it, I believe.

29:28: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** But what's the evidence that that's actually true? And what's the evidence that the 30 million excess men, the gender imbalance that exists because of the one-child policy, has led to this additional level, this excess level of violence that wouldn't have been there otherwise, and that the violence is somehow tamed by men beating up their wives?

LETA HONG-FINCHER: I don't think there is any real – I mean, there are a lot of academic studies, actually, especially by Mainland Chinese academics, who do a lot of studies about how all of these unmarried men, the millions of unmarried men, pose an enormous risk to social stability. But I don't think there's any really reliable data that that's actually true. So, on one level, the Party itself is using this as a scaremongering tactic. But then you look at all of the other aspects of it. It is that feminism per se is also perceived as a threat. Now, why is it a threat? It's not just that you have, ok, the specter of millions of unmarried men rising up to cause the downfall of the Communist Party. It's also that you have so many more millions of incredibly talented, educated women who, rather than wanting to get married and have children are just, in the minds of the Communist Party, just turning against the nation. They're not doing what they should be doing, which is being a good wife and mother and being tame and contributing to harmony within the family.

31:06: One other thing that is important is rhetorically, shortly after Xi Jinping came to power, he started pushing a lot of this new rhetoric about family values. This term *jia*, or family, is very important. China is a big family, with Xi Jinping at the head. He's this paternalistic patriarch. But China is comprised of millions of little families. And it is very important for the political stability of the big family, of China, the *guo jia*, the nation state, to have harmonious little families. And what is a harmonious family? It's where everybody plays their correct hierarchical role, where the man is the head of the household and the woman is subservient to the man. She's subservient to her father when she's a daughter. She's subservient to her husband when she's a wife. And she listens to her son when she has a child. And of course, that's basically Confucianism, which is also making a huge resurgence in today's Communist Party propaganda.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: It also sounds like the 1950s in the United States, other than listening to your son when you're older.

LETA HONG-FINCHER: Right. No, absolutely.

32:27: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** But doesn't that kind of speak to a failure of the imagination? Because in many parts of the world, women can be married and work and have a family. In many parts of the world, nations are stable, even when large numbers of women are not married and don't have kids.

LETA HONG-FINCHER: It makes absolutely no economic sense. This is just where this political ideology trumps everything else. And even politically, personally, I think it's a big mistake, especially for Xi Jinping to be doubling down on this clearly extraordinarily unpopular rhetoric. Because there's no way that educated women are going to change their minds about wanting to defer marriage, wanting to pursue their career dreams or educational dreams, just because Xi Jinping is telling them to marry and have more babies.

By the way, this propaganda was somewhat effective, the "leftover women" or *sheng nu* propaganda, when it was initially pushed out in 2007. But it only really kind of worked for a few years. And now that we're in 2023, 2024, you know, it's not working at all. It's backfiring terribly. And I think that Xi Jinping, there's no question, he's alienating all of these educated young Han Chinese women. But on the other hand, I'm kind of heartened by the fact that so many young women are realizing that they can say no to that intense marriage pressure.

34:08: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So Chinese women are looking at all of these different forces in play. They're looking at the fact that they have good jobs and interesting lives and disposable income and friends. And they're looking at what marriage is in China right now. You're getting pressure that you're supposed to have kids, but the Party, the government is still controlling your fertility, so not telling you "do what you want to do," but just, "we said you could have one. Now we want you to have three. And in fact, we want you to stay at home. We're not going to protect you from your husband if he beats you up. It's going to be very hard for you to get a divorce," because the new marriage law makes it more difficult. So women are voting with their feet.

And it comes back to the question I was asking earlier, and that I know you also hold in your mind, which is, and where is this going to lead? I mean that if you have single women who are in the workforce, that's actually probably good for China's economy, because the economy needs the boost. If women were to do what the government is telling them they should do, and they stay at home and have kids, it takes some of that educated labor out of the workforce at a critical time, when economic growth has been slowing and the workforce is contracting. It just doesn't feel like it leads to a good place, including for political purposes, because the Party has always, during the Reform and Opening Up era, looked to its economic success to justify its continued rule as an authoritarian one-party state.

35:38: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** Yeah, absolutely. You know, I cannot speak at all to what is especially in Xi Jinping's mind. I don't see how this helps the Party politically either. I mean, it certainly doesn't help the economy. I don't see how this is going to be effective in any way at all. I mean, the pressure has been very strong for a long time, but I think this pressure is going to increase even more. The parents themselves are getting pressure to put pressure on their daughters to marry and have babies, as the government increasingly rolls out its, it's called the New Era Marriage and Child Rearing Project pilot projects in all these different provinces across China. There's one county that just offered a reward of something like 1,000 renmenbi, which is pitifully low, if the bride is 25 years or younger. So, I think it's really quite laughable if it weren't so tragic. But I don't see how that is going to succeed in any way. It's not just young women increasingly resisting as individuals, saying no to marriage pressure, no to baby pressure. This also could actually backfire in a really serious way politically. If you just look at the so-called white paper protests...

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: In late 2022, November 2022.

36:20: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** At the end of 2022. So it wasn't a large number of people in total, but it was really extraordinary that so many cities in China had primarily young people going out onto the streets and openly protesting against the Communist Party. Some of these people in the streets were even calling for Xi Jinping to step down. I mean, this is phenomenally risky. And it was really striking to see how many young women were on the front lines of those very bold and risky and dangerous street protests in China. This is where I think it's going to be very tricky. So the government has been for awhile and now is going to increasingly push educated young Han Chinese women into getting married and having babies. How is it going to do that? Well, actually, you know, the central government could do something really drastic, like ban abortion. That's what's happening in all these states in America. I mean, the U. S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe vs. Wade*. But I don't think that even Xi Jinping would want to do something like that, because I think that would just cause such a huge outcry and revolt.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Well, and also, as long as the Party still has this limit of how many children you can have, like, "We ban abortions if you only have had one or two children, but if this is your fourth child, then you need to abort."

38:00: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** Speaking of that, I mean, forced abortions, look at what has been happening in Xinjiang with the Uyghur, primarily Uyghur, but also Kazakh women. Especially starting around 2017, there was a sharp drop in the birth rates in Xinjiang. And there are so many accounts, so many studies. I mean, I myself include in the new edition of *Leftover Women*, the 10th anniversary edition, a whole new section about Uyghur women and forced sterilization. And I interviewed a woman who herself was forcibly sterilized. And this is happening en masse to Uyghur and Kazakh women, and it's not just forced sterilization. There are accounts of forced abortion, forced insertion of IUDs. It's obvious that China's new so called three-child policy is not a relaxation of birth limits. It's a new form of control. Prior to the three child policy, I mean actually prior to the two-child policy, because the government in Xinjiang started tightening restrictions for ethnic

minority women having babies already under the two-child policy. Prior to largely 2017, in fact, it was quite common for ethnic minority women to have even more than three babies.

And this was – local population planning officials were turning a blind eye to it. It wasn't really enforced. But that policy has ended. I mean, in 2017, the Chinese government said, well, now, you know, in the name of, quote, ethnic equality, everybody's going to have the same number of children. So it's a contraction of birth allowances for ethnic minority women.

40:00: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** The official numbers in the '90s, anyway, were urban women were allowed to have one child. Rural women generally were allowed to have two. And ethnic minorities were allowed to have three. So they've almost flipped it. And of course, the actual enforcement of the policy varied from province to province, city to city, sometimes district to district. So some local officials would turn a blind eye while others would drag a woman in for a forced abortion and forced sterilization, including Han Chinese women, or they'd, you know, tear down someone's house or people would lose their jobs. It was really draconian and invasive. And again, with that kind of experience in the recent past for women in China, for young women who are now educated and thinking about their options, it's certainly understandable why many of them are choosing not to marry. Obviously, for Uyghur women who were incarcerated and then sterilized while they were in detention, when hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs were in detention from 2017 onward for several years and some of them still are in prison, you know, they weren't even given the room to have a choice. It just happened to them.

41:15: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** Yeah. You know, it shows you that, of course, I mean, what's happening with the Uyghur population in particular is just so appalling and horrifying, the brutality of the Chinese government. So clearly the central government is more than capable of enforcing violations of individuals' rights. Forcing people to have abortions, forcing them to be sterilized, that's a lot easier than forcing somebody to actually marry and have a baby.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Yeah, it's ironic that, I mean, it's a phenomenon around the world that educated women tend to have smaller families. And that can be good for an economy because the smaller families mean there are fewer kids, more resources, more attention can be given to each kid, who can then get their own education and contribute at a higher level to the economy. But with China neither being particularly interested in allowing a lot of immigration nor wanting to have a bigger population of Uyghurs or other ethnic minorities, and with the fertility rate way below replacement rate, and it's among the lowest in Asia.

42:36: **LETA HONG-FINCHER:** It is, and it hasn't bottomed out yet. I mean, obviously, they're going to bottom out at some point. But even when they do bottom out and maybe begin increasing again, just think about how many decades it's going to be for that demographic trend to even change at all.

But then, you know, I always see the silver lining, which is – it's actually a big thing that there are individual young women who are thinking more about their own destinies. And feminists say the personal is political. And this is extremely true in China. So even just one young woman today, let's say, because young women today in China are much more likely to just say, "No, thank you, I don't really want to get married or not yet anyway. And no, thank you, I don't really want to have a baby." You know, that's a big deal. That means for that young woman, she's taking charge of her own life and the possibilities are greater for her life. And you just look at collectively what that means for millions and millions of young women.

(Music under)

43:50: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** What it means, is a story still playing out – and it's a complicated one. Yes, many young, educated Chinese women are choosing different lives for themselves than the Party might like, and in so doing are shaping China's future.

But as some of Leta Hong Fincher's research shows, social pressure, traditional mores, and some government regulations, have already contributed to shaping the future for many Chinese women – including by causing many to miss out on owning homes and benefitting from the meteoric rise in value Chinese real estate saw over the last couple of decades. Parents tended to buy their sons homes, but not daughters, women – including many Leta interviewed – contributed their savings to homes that were only in their husband's or partner's names, and some cities, like Shanghai, made it hard for single women to own their own homes. Add it all up, Leta says, and China's women have largely missed out on the largest increase in residential real estate wealth in history, valued at about twice the size of the US residential market.

Now that there's a real estate slump, more affluent single, educated Chinese women can buy their own homes. But the Party's still reluctant to let those single women be mothers, and get social services for their children, without being married. The Party may be trying to stave off what it sees as a de-population crisis, but Leta says the Party still seems to see single educated women as a chaotic force to be tamed – and those old habits die hard.

That's it for this episode. Thanks to Leta Hong-Fincher for joining us.

The China Books Podcast, is a companion of the *China Books Review*, which offers incisive reviews, essays, interviews and more, and is edited by Alec Ash. You can find it at chinabooksreview.com. The China Books Review is co-published by The Wire China, led by David Barboza, and by Asia Society's Center on U.S.-China Relations, led by Orville Schell, with me as deputy director. I'm also the producer of this podcast.

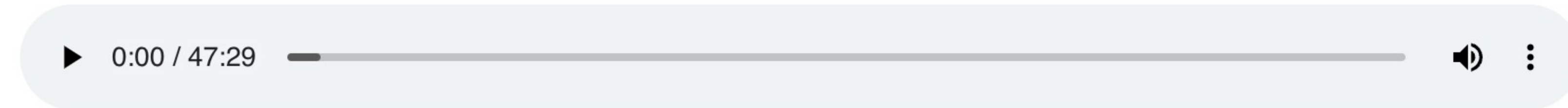
If you've got comments, questions, or ideas for future episodes – please send them my way. I'm at mmagistad@asiasociety.org.

If you like the podcast, please subscribe – at Apple Podcasts, or on your other favorite podcast app. And it would be much appreciated if you could leave a review. It helps others find the podcast.

Thank you so much for listening. See you next time – on the first Tuesday of the month. Meanwhile – happy reading.

(*Music out.*) ■

Audio



Mary Kay Magistad is deputy director of Asia Society's Center on US-China Relations. An award-winning journalist, she lived and reported in East Asia for more than two decades, including in China for NPR (1995-99) and PRI/BBC's *The World* (2003-13). She has created two critically acclaimed podcasts, *On China's New Silk Road* and *Whose Century Is It?* She is host and producer of the China Books podcast.

[Browse the full archive >](#)



Browse our China book listings

Besides our twice-weekly feature content, we also maintain dynamic, regularly updated lists of all upcoming and recent China books, as well as bestselling titles and editors' picks from the pack. Click through to read more about our book listings project.

Sign up for our newsletter

First name

Last name

Email *

Submit >

CHINA *Books Review*

The Wire *China*



[About](#) [Submit](#) [Contact](#) [Archives](#)

