

Discipline and Subjection in the Social Construction of Leftover Women From the perspective of media-making

Yan Ziwei¹

Abstract

Unmarried Chinese Women above the age of 27 are ranked as “leftover women”, a name given by Chinese state media to force women back home. To investigate how this term exerts discipline on single women and their consequent responses to such discipline, this thesis focuses on four TV series targeting on overage unmarried women to illustrate the various forms of social discipline imposed on them and their tendency toward psychic subjection which generates docile bodies consequently. The expected discipline imposed by this name proves that Chinese society is still trying every means to drag women back home, and the social value constructed by the state media makes the real freedom of women impossible.

Key Words: leftover women, TV series, discipline, subjection

Introduction

The most recent news about a 62-years-old unmarried dancer being insulted by such comments as “having no children is the greatest failure of a woman”, “it’s funny that she really thinks herself as a peacock princess” etc. which define the values of women only through marriage and children, triggers a fevered debate among people. Strangely, most contumelious comments are made by women themselves instead of men who are supposed to be the main force to oppress women. More strangely, even though the title “leftover women” which is given to such kind of women as this dancer is tinged with contempt, as it seems to imply that women can not get married because they are not chosen by men, few women reject it. On the contrary, many unmarried women are willing to call themselves in such way, or even afraid of being “left”. Why women unconsciously accept or even internalize the male domination? This problem deserves attention.

Bourdieu put that the established order, with its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, its privileges and its injustices, manages to perpetuate itself so very easily and that it is often possible for the most intolerable conditions of existence to appear as acceptable and even natural. He called this recognition and acceptance of male domination, or the submission of established order of discourse “symbolic violence”, a violence that is hardly noticed, almost invisible for the victims on whom it is perpetrated; a violence which is exercised principally via the purely symbolic channels of communication and knowledge of recognition and, in the final analysis, of feelings. (Bourdieu 2001: 2) The symbolic order composed by discourses sets up social authority which can not be denied by its subjects, as the connection between words and things is not only the micro power carrier, but also a kind of “symbolic violence” implementing the unarguable authority into our emotion and perception.

In Chinese society, the intolerable conditions of women existence which last for two thousands years are acceptable and natural, because the “symbolic violence” is invisible for the victims under the disguise of different rhetoric strategies. From the perspective of gender, the history of social development is parallel with the history of constructing women. According to the Marxist theory of social structure, “the mode of production of material life determines the social, political and intellectual life process in general” (Marx & Engles1972: 82), and to construct women is to keep making demands and expectations to the subjects living in a specific field on the basis of the dual requirements of material and population production, during which the reconstruction of women is completed.

¹ Sex: female, Birth Place: Xuzhou JiangSu Province, mail: 1021780423@qq.com, University: University of Science and Technology Beijing, Education: Graduate student, Major: English Language and Literature

In a word, the society chooses different rhetoric strategies with strong ideological overtone on the basis of political as well as economic requirements at different times .

The rhetorical strategies applied to construct the social roles of Chinese women have experienced dramatic changes over the past century: from being an obedient daughter, wife and mother in accordance with the Confucian values of “three obediences and four virtues”, to being an “iron lady” who is able to balance work and family in the new age. It seems that Chinese society has already acknowledged the values of women as members of society, but such naming as “full-time wife” which frames women with no jobs as a new class to encourage women to go back home, and “Sheng nu” or “leftover women” which laughs at unmarried women for being left and rejected by men proves that the society still defines a woman’s life through marriage and family.

Background and History of Rhetoric Strategies used by Chinese Society to Construct Women

From Han Dynasty, “three obediences and four virtues”—the product of politics and economy—were put forward in Confucian classics to discipline women. The political needs of “great unification” made it necessary for the Han Dynasty to reconstruct a set of corresponding social theories in order to solidify the primacy of emperors. However, with the representative of empress Lv and empress dowager Dou who held power successively, imperial harem interfered politics by taking advantage of the emperor’s favor and great disorder was inevitable, thus numerous ministers gave advice to rebuild order among concubines, and *Biography of Women in Ancient China* was born consequently. (Qu 2016: 126) After that, three obediences and four virtues became the codes of conduct of women. Literally, regulating women’s behaviors was for the social harmony, or in Foucault’s words, for the “police” whose sole purpose is to “lead man to the utmost happiness to be enjoyed in this life.” To go further, the society cared for the good of the soul, the good of the body, and saw to the benefits that can be derived from living in society (Foucault 1979: 28) only on the condition that women were disciplined to behave themselves.

Changes in economic pattern further asked for obedience from women. According to historian Xu Zhuo Yun, from the Warring States Period to the beginning of Han Dynasty, “men plowed the fields and women wove cloth” which were the typical social division of labor provided women with great opportunities to create household income as silk fabrics produced by them were the major source of income in such period when the industry and commerce dominated economic development, therefore, women almost shared the same social status with men, yet after the policy of physiocracy and restriction of business were carried out to respond to the demands of the time, women created much less wealth than men, accordingly, their status plummeted.

However, as time changes, the status of women seems to improve again. In the early days of the founding of new China, women were gradually shaped as “iron lady” to meet the needs of national construction, and the collusion between national politics as well as economy and the portrait of women advocated by the state media keeps functioning. “Equality between men and women” became a popular concept especially during the Agrarian Revolutionary War² whose purpose was overwhelming the landlord class both politically and economically, and distributing all land equally. Besides, as early as 1936, Chairman Mao Zedong wrote in *Linjiang Xian—to Comrade Ding Ling*: “Yesterday Miss Wen³, today General Wu⁴.” to praise her heroic behaviors, overturning the stereotype of women by endowing them with the attribute of “Wu” which was supposed to belong to men. After that, various women’s movement were launched by the Communist Party of China to impose such appeal to the body and consciousness of women, intending to call upon them to join the “Great Leap Forward” and make their contributions for “emancipating the whole mankind”. According to the reports at that time, the difference in physical strength between sexes was ignored thoroughly, instead, superior performances of women were trumpeted to prove that women can not only exert themselves in agricultural and light industrial production, but also in heavy industry (Wang 2020:32) Under such circumstance, the image of “iron lady” was established.

At the end of 1992, Deng Xiaoping's talks delivered on his inspection tour of southern China clarified the strategic approach of the reform of the economic system. A massive redistribution of social wealth converted national assets into corporate capital and then into individual assets, striking China with the shock-wave of unemployment.

²The Agrarian Revolutionary War was the decade long (1927-1937) confrontation between the Chinese Communist Party led by Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army and the Chinese people against Chiang Kai-shek's ruling Kuomintang Party, toward the abolition of the feudal land system, and the founding of the workers' and peasants' democratic republic.

³The Chinese character “武”, represents courage and strength, the qualities supposed to be owned by men.

⁴The Chinese character “文”, represents elegance and superior literary skills, the qualities are more likely to be owned by women.

Unfortunately, social welfare and unemployment security system have not been established yet, thus people whose survival depended on working unit system faced up with the enormous threat as they had to be self-reliant now. During this process, women became the first choice of Chinese society to sacrifice. Female workers in large and medium-sized state-owned enterprises were the first to be laid off; thousands of rural girls who flooded into joint-stock processing industries for a living became the cheapest source of labor. However, mass culture evolved such social inequality into some kind of specific issue of social division of labor, and entitled unemployed women “full-time wife” rather than “housewife” to highlight that women were not unemployed essentially, as they were still “hired” by the housework, through which the bare reality that even though the role of “full-time wife” was given the meaning of social labor, women who played such role were not paid. (Dai 2007: 356-57)

With the development of the times, women gain more job opportunities, and consequently, they become more self-satisfied with economic independence as their assurance, because of which, increasingly amount of women tend to marry late or even stay single. Correspondingly, in 2007, a new phrase was created by the state-run media for this group: “leftover women”. (Fincher 2014). Shortly after that, China’s State Language Commission recorded the phrase as a neologism in their official publication *The Language Situation in China* (Li & Li 2013).

The superiority condition of economic independence, low pressure to consume and small risk to invest makes “leftover women” a “salable goods” in the economic market. Advertisements such as “women must buy a piece of jewelry for themselves”, “women, be good to yourself”, “skin-whitening for seven days to retrieve true love” cover all kinds of social media. On November 11, 2010, Taobao launched the first “Single Shopping Day”, setting records of daily total sales with 936 million yuan offered by 21 million people among which 60% are women. (Chen & Lv 2011:47) Obviously, “leftover women” has become a profitable symbol in the mind of merchants. Meanwhile, “attention economy” (or “eyeball economy”) was born with the development of the internet. The concept of the “attention economy” was first developed by Herbert Alexander Simon, an American economist, political scientist and cognitive psychologist, which means the collective human capacity to engage with the many elements in our environments that demand mental focus. The term reflects an acknowledgement that the human capacity for attention is limited and that the content and events vying for that attention far exceed that capacity. For content producers and marketers, the recognition of attention as a limited and valuable resource provides them with a competitive landscape where they vie for the greatest possible share of the commodity: television needs attention because only audience rating is able to guarantee the economic interest of TV station; magazines need attention as circulation is the backbone of its operation and websites need even more attention due to the economic value of click rate. Driven by economic interests, media responds actively to “attention economy”, attracting public attention through prying novelty to meet human instinct.

According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, physiological needs including sex, violence and novelty are the most universal and common needs of human, thus the satisfaction provided by the media is able to occupy the audience market to the maximum, and “the growth of a capitalisteconomy gave rise to the specific modality of disciplinary power”. (Foucault 1995:249) In the patriarchal society, the subject of gaze and hunting must be male, while female can only be the object of gaze, therefore, media is happy to uncover the lives of women or even their privacy to fulfil the curiosity of the audiences, and the interest of ‘curiosity’ is also a political interest. (Foucault 1995:80) During this process, disciplinary power is exercised through its invisibility, and at the same time, it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. (Foucault 1995:212) Therefore, not only are women unable to realize that they are taken as commodity used for exchanging money, they are further disciplined to behave themselves such as buying cosmetics to beautify their faces, taking weight-loss pills to shape their bodies, joining in blind dates to meet an appropriate marriage partner etc. to meet public aesthetic and moral standard established by patriarchal society without any chance to refuse, because “it is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection”. (Foucault 1995:213)

In conclusion, on the basis of the living conditions of the modern women, the discourse of “leftover women” with a sardonic attitude is constructed, through which “eyeballs” are attracted to both solidify the patriarchal culture and obtain higher commercial interests. (Zhou & Zhang 2014: 104)

The “leftover women” phenomenon has attracted much scholarly attention from different disciplines, such as literature (Zhang, 2009; Cai, 2014), linguistics (Feldshuh, 2018; Yu, 2019), and especially social science (Shen, 2010; Gao, 2011; Fincher, 2014; Gaetano, 2014) Among all these studies, most of scholars pay attention to the reason for the existence of leftover women and the function of local Chinese-language media discourses in the construction of social ideology linked with these women, few studies focus on the forms of such construction.

In what way “leftover women” are disciplined? What kind of punishment do they receive for their resistance? And consequently, whether they are perplexed by social discourses and thus reshape their definition of themselves? Few scholars investigate these questions.

As mentioned above, in contemporary society, “leftover women” are created to be a “salable goods” in the Chinese economic market, and meanwhile, media’s frequent attention to “leftover women” makes women’s bodies a place where power is exercised. Foucault, in the eyes of the feminist critic Judith Butler, plays a vital role in the development of contemporary feminism or post-feminism (Butler 1993), as it is Foucault who points out the significance of body in the analysis of women’s oppressed status by emphasizing the materiality of human body rather than replacing it with ideology, and further making it clear that the legalization of gender inequality is based on the physical differences between sexes— “male superiority” and “female inferiority” are proved by biological theories (Hu 2010: 142), besides, Foucault’s theory of power discourse also points out a direction for feminists to deconstruct the social construction of women.

Theoretical Framework

The classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body—to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces. (Foucault 1995:149) Nowadays, in every society, the body is still in the grip of very strict powers, which impose on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations no longer in the form of monarchical or military control, but in a latent network of micro-power. They do not treat the body as a “wholesale”, an indissociable unity, but work it “retail”, individually, by applying these methods of powers—disciplines—implying an uninterrupted, constant surveillance, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its result. (Foucault 1995:150) Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies. (Foucault 1995:244)

Of course, the submission of bodies should be achieved through the control of ideas. Taking Bentham’s panopticon as his analysis object, Foucault elaborates that constant surveillance makes disciplinary power an ‘integrated’ system which links from the inside to the economy and to the aims of the mechanism in which it is practised. (Foucault 1995:201) It functions permanently and largely in an invisible silence, but gives “power of mind over mind”, controlling the ideas of subjects being supervised by putting them in a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert... (Foucault 1995:241) Such panoptic schema also exists in the social life, functioning through discourses constructed by the social media or other state apparatus. Discourse, Foucault argues, constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about (Hall 2002: 43), thus it has the power to control and supervise, and further to discipline the subjects.

For those who can realize that they are being disciplined and thus make efforts to resist, punishment is an effective means to discourage them from rebelling. Punishment is described as an art of effects by Foucault, and rather than opposing the enormity of the penalty to the enormity of the crime, one must adjust to one another the two series that follow from the crime: its own effects and those of the penalty, (Foucault 1995:105) because punishment has to make use not of the body, but of representation, and it is directed above all at others, at all the potentially guilty (Foucault 1995:107). So these obstacle-signs that are gradually engraved in the representation of the condemned man must therefore circulate rapidly and widely; they must be accepted and redistributed by all; they must shape the discourse that each individual has with others and by which crime is forbidden to all by all—the true coin that is substituted in people’s minds for the false profits of crime. (Foucault 1995:122)

The result of being disciplined by micro-power is the docility of subjects. This docility firstly attacks their souls which are subjected to habits, rules, orders, an authority that is exercised continually around them and upon them, and which they must allow to function automatically in them. There are two quite distinct ways, therefore, of reacting to the offence: one may restore the juridical subject of the social pact, or shape an obedient subject, according to the general and detailed form of some power. (Foucault 1995:143) Then the soul inhabits the subjects and brings them to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body. (Foucault 1995:40)

Media-Making: the Discipline and Subjection in TV series of Leftover Women

The definition of “leftover women” refers to urban, educated women above the age of 27 who have never been married. As mentioned above, the origin of this phrase can be traced back to 2007 when it first appeared in the state-run media, and after China’s State Language Commission recorded the phrase as a neologism in their official publication *The Language Situation in China* (Li and Li 2013), it has been commonly used in the Chinese media and people’s daily life.

If these accounts were allowed to be printed and circulated, it was because they were expected to have the effect of an ideological control. (Foucault 1995:80) The circulation of the neologism “leftover women” satisfies the needs of patriarchal society to consolidate the subordination of women by constructing the public ideology. Under close examination, the origin of “leftover” is based on an unreasonable logic that women who are still single at a certain age are left and rejected by men without concerning whether they are willing to be single or not, thus excluding their identification with themselves and attitude toward marriage. What’s more, the social stipulation of the appropriate age of marriage is itself inappropriate. Even though it can be justified by the fact that female body has its time-limit to give birth to a baby, having children or not should be the free choice of women but not a necessity or guarantee for their future marriage. However, as the product of political and economic requirements, “leftover women” has already become a sign tinged with social bias against women, “operating to the full in the language of every day, and constantly reinforcing it with new accounts”. (Foucault 1995:126) Responding to the call of state media, local Chinese media does likewise to solidify the social impression of “overage unmarried women” as “leftover”.

They add accounts to this sign by constructing “leftover women” as a problem waiting to be solved to imply that the society is responsible for working together to help them find a husband. Typical headlines run by sensational tabloids are: “Overcoming the Big Four Emotional Blocks—leftover Women Can Break out of Being Single”; “Eight Simple Moves to Escape the Leftover Women Trap,” and the column “Do Leftover Women Really Deserve Our Sympathy?” was posted on the Women’s Federation website (Fincher 2014:10). As soon as the ideology of gender roles is constructed and consolidated, social media will successfully solve this problem by pressing unmarried women to stop being so ambitious and get married. This abduction of women is actually pulling women back to home from work, the place empowering them to be equal with men, and conveying a sexist message which is a conflicted response to women’s empowerment. (Feldshuh 2017: 13)

The media, especially TV series, is one of the most important ways that “leftover women” discourse is promoted in China, through which the ideal womanhood is portrayed, even though there exist women who are not married over thirty, it will depict them as seekers for love and persuade them to stop searching because their true love is always nearby.

In such TV series as *In Time with You* (2012), *Blind Date* (2017) and *Let’s Get Married* (2013), female characters are all close to thirty years old and stay single, but at the end of the story, they all find their true love is always nearby them. Cheng Youqing, the female protagonist of *In Time with You*, is afraid of falling in love with her classmate and friend Li Daren, thus refusing to treat her feeling toward him seriously. Only after her illusion of other men crashes over and over again, she finds Li Daren actually loves her all the time, so she ultimately admits her love to him. The same story of “true love is always nearby” happens in *Blind Date*. The heroine Xia Tian stimulated by her mother’s verbal attack, decides to change her appearance and find a boyfriend to prove her attraction. After dating with many men and getting tired of it, Xia Tian finds her colleague who always stands by her side is her true love. Similarly, in *Let’s Get Married*, Yang Tao is forced by her mother to go on a date with an older youth named Guo Ran, only to find he is very unpleasing. However, numerous failed dates finally bring her back to him, and they accept each other anyway. Three TV series convey the same message that girls have already met their true love at some point without being aware of it, and if they pay attention to people around them, their Mr. Right will show up. The similar plot that heroines are pushed forward by their mothers to find a partner also implies a universal social phenomenon that parents are always anxious to marry off their children. “Every time neighbors see me, they will ask me ‘is your daughter married?’ but what can I tell them? You disgrace me.” such words are frequently employed by parents not only in the TV series, but in daily life.

Seeing through the appearance, the underlying cause of parents’ anxiety is the discourses setting standards for women. Discourse becomes the vehicle of the law: the constant principle of universal recoding. Parents become Foucault’s “the poets of the people” who at last join those who call themselves the ‘missionaries of eternal reason’; they will become moralists (Foucault 1995:126) and the most unswerving fighters of social morality. “Dating that is not aimed at marriage is acting indecently”, “the golden time of women only lasts a few years. Your life will be over if you don’t cherish it to find a good husband”, these salutary ideas and terrible images take possession of parents and they spread them through their family. (Foucault 1995:126)

Both parents in the real life and in TV series take actions based on the premise that the unmarried state of women is caused by their refusal to find the so-called true love, taking it for granted that women are thirsty for marriage. That's why Xia Tian and Yang Tao are arranged in the story to be pushed forward by their mother to find a partner and they do succeed in the end. But if they stick to be career-oriented, not in any hurry to tie the knot, or even exclude marriage to deny any possibility to be disrupted by a man their own life, what will happen to them?

Some hints can be found in *Let's Get Married*. Even though Yang Tao has done a good job as a lobby manager in a four-star hotel for six years, she cannot avoid being dismissed just because her possibility to get married and give birth to a child in the future brings intangible risk to the hotel. The president of the hotel becomes a wise judge, punishing a girl whose behavior violates social norms by firing her, but her sentence is not only activated by a desire to punish, but an intent to correct, reclaim, cure. (Foucault 1995:18) She instructs Yang Tao that women must always get married and give birth to children, otherwise her life will be meaningless, and she hopes it would be a good chance for Yang Tao to think about her future and make better choices. "A technique of improvement represses, in the penalty, the strict expiation of evil-doing, and relieves the magistrates of the demeaning task of punishing." (Foucault 1995:18) The president attempts to improve her employee's quality of life through firing her to prompt her pursuit of marriage—the biggest dream of a woman, thus her "task of punishing" is more like a well-meaning suggestion. Applying for other jobs after being dismissed, Yang Tao finds herself being rejected by all the recruiters because of her "unsolved" personal affairs. It is under the secret help of Guo Ran that Yang Tao comes through this awkward layoff. The society is disciplining Yang Tao for her being single at a certain age prescribed by the society through threatening her physical subsistence, rather than imposing any immediate physical pain. The pain of the body itself is no longer the constituent element of the penalty. From being an art of unbearable sensations, punishment has become an economy of suspended rights. (Foucault 1995:19) Yang Tao is deprived of the economic capability, losing the capital to fight for her own rights. In the face of survival, the needs of body easily imprison spiritual pursuit. Even if the patriarchal society does not make use of violent or bloody punishment, it is always the body that is at issue—the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission. (Foucault 1995:35) Threatening to famish Yang Tao's body, the society succeeds to acquire its docility: with more eager to get married, Yang Tao does not reject to go to blind date any more.

Besides being "punished" by the society, Yang Tao is observed and admonished all the time by her single mother, friends, colleagues and other parents who are eager to find a daughter-in-law. According to Foucault, in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations through putting each individual in the state of being looked at, observed, and described in detail, and thus assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility (Foucault 1995: 150, 217). From the beginning of the story, Xue Sumei, Yang Tao's mother, registers an account in an online dating website to arrange various blind dates for her daughter, and keeps a close watch on every imperceptible change in Yang Tao's emotional trend. Every time Yang's attitude toward her date dissatisfies Xue, she will act to be inconsolable to wear down her will. Through putting her daughter in the state of being observed, Xue assures that both Yang Tao's body is in the grip of her powers, and Yang's mind is subjected to her forces. What's more, Xue repeats to highlight that Yang is not young as a woman, and it's her responsibility to give birth to a baby at an optimal age, so she must get married as soon as possible. She takes the daughter of their neighbour as an example to warn Yang that her future baby will be eaten up with diseases like her if she insists to be an elderly parturient woman. In Xue's mind, their neighbour is like Foucault's slaves who are subjected to punishment, and to Yang Tao who sees slaves, represents them to herself, the pains they bear are concentrated into a single idea. All the moments of slavery of their neighbour are contracted into a representation capturing Yang Tao's mind to punish her in such a disguised form.

And it is the economically ideal punishment as it is maximal for Yang who represents it to herself—conquering her soul only through exposing to her slaves(neighbour) without any need of other tools.(Foucault 1995:108) The more severe punishment is inflicted on Yang by her best friend Kiki who finishes her eight-month-marriage because of her failure to deliver a baby. Tracing back to the first day of Kiki's marriage, she convinces Yang Tao of the fact that happiness can only be pursued by oneself. She looks forward to delivering a baby so that her place in her husband's heart will be stable. House, car and money which are necessities of her ideal marriage should be earned by man, and her responsibility is giving him a baby to share all his property. So she makes efforts to adjust her physical conditions to prepare to be pregnant, while going to the gym, doing yoga and drinking diet tea all day long to prevent pregnancy from taking away her slim body and pretty face. Her body has become a body of exercise, rather than of speculative physics; a body manipulated by authority, rather than imbued with animal spirits; a body of useful training and not of rational mechanics. (Foucault 1995:169)

The body of Kiki is a carrier of patriarchy, which inscribes its expectations of women, but unfortunately, her body does not meet all its requirements as Kiki has already over thirty years old. Punishment befalls Kiki, and she is unable to be pregnant. Considering Yang Tao has been brainwashed that it is a women's duty to give birth to babies, and if she fails to perform it, she will not be qualified enough to marry, so the pains Kiki bears are concentrated into a single idea devouring Yang Tao's determination to marry late, punishing her will through threatening to inflict the same pain to her. A punitive city is gradually built in which Yang's neighbour and friend are slaves being punished.

It presents everywhere as scene, spectacle, sign, discourse; legible like an open book; operating by a permanent recodification of the mind of Yang Tao; eliminating crime by those obstacles placed before the idea of crime; acting invisibly and uselessly on the 'soft fibres of the brain' (Foucault 1995:144) The subjection is gradually substituted for resistance in Yang Tao's soul. When Yang Tao's colleagues among whom a 26-year-old women has already had a 4-year-old child talk about their marriage life, Yang feels very awkward, and even ashamed of herself as they ask her about her husband. And faced with such humiliation as "she is already 30 but still left on the shelf, who knows how did she live before?", "her beauty is a bad sign for the husband, who dares to marry her?" or "I must warn my son against being lured by her beauty", Yang Tao tolerates with shame, as she persuades herself that women of my age are devaluing everyday, so I am not qualified enough to argue. Yang Tao is aware of being subjected to a field of visibility, but now she assumes responsibility for the constraints of power instead of fighting against it. She makes them play spontaneously upon herself; she inscribes in herself the power relation in which she simultaneously plays both roles.(Foucault 1995:181) It explains why Yang Tao, a girl who used to be independent and confident, confesses her depreciation now. The observation of her mother, colleagues and other parents imposes power on Yang Tao, and she internalizes it to allow such constraints of power work upon her own mind, thus she becomes the prison of herself, and her past personality is shackled to be the prisoner of the cage built by their joint efforts.

In addition, the resume of Yang Tao also records her marital state and exposes her personal affair to each employer. "The spread of disciplinary procedures is not in the form of enclosed institutions, but as centers of observation disseminated throughout society." (Foucault 1995:239) Yang Tao's resume which is the carrier of her state of "leftover" publishes on the Internet, becoming the object of observation disseminated throughout society. The option of "single" is considered to be a problem by all employers, therefore, Yang Tao is constantly asked about the reason for still being single in her thirties. "Are you a celibatarian?", employers attempt to get detailed information, "why you have not get married until now?", "do you have any intent to have a baby? When?" etc. The ideal point of punishment today is an investigation that will be extended without limit to a meticulous and ever more analytical observation, the calculated leniency of a penalty that will be interlaced with the ruthless curiosity of an examination. (Foucault 1995:152) Through investigating the detailed information of Yang Tao's personal affairs, the employers feed their curiosity while exerting pressure on her through taking her emotional state as a factor to inspect, unconsciously disciplining a single woman who is supposed to marry by threatening to deprive her of her economic rights. The society is exercising power to coerce women into marrying early through taking Yang Tao as an example to warn them that they are under "permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance which is capable of making all visible".

The faceless gaze transforms the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes—the observation of all employers—post everywhere. (Foucault 1995:241) And after observing Yang Tao's attitude toward marriage, they decline her to make sure their company will not get into the trouble of losing clients because of their employees' departure during their marriage leave or maternity leave. The potential risk of being unable to feed herself is producing a subjected and practised body, docile body of Yang Tao. And an account of subjection and docility, it seems, must be traced in the turns of psychic life. More specifically, it must be traced in the peculiar turning of a subject against itself that takes place in acts of self-reproach, conscience, and melancholia that work in tandem with process of social regulation (Butler 1997: 15.) It can be inferred that Yang Tao is prohibited from having her own choice to marry or stay single. If she chooses to marry late, she will risk losing her position in job market, but if she selects to be single, her life will not be complete in her eyes. The social norm about marriage stipulating that women have to marry earlier or they will have little chance to pursue their values in career has been constructed through constant observation and denial of employers, and the power of the Norm appears through the disciplines (Foucault 1995: 209). Surrounded by the seemingly absent norms which is actually present everywhere, Yang Tao is disciplined to be dying to find a partner, and her physical as well as psychic subjection is shaping gradually, which is the reason for her easily being tricked by a womanizer named Gao Jian in the later plot. "I doubt something wrong with me, otherwise I will not stay single by now", instead of finding reasons like "the right one hasn't turned up yet" as before, Yang Tao reproaches herself at last.

“It is not an external respect for the norm or fear of punishment alone that act upon the convict, but the workings of the conscience itself” that touches Yang Tao. So even though Yang Tao does not know anything about Gao Jian, she is happy to accept his proposal. “A profound submission, rather than a superficial training; a change of ‘morality’, rather than of attitude” (Foucault 1995:266) shakes Yang Tao’s determination to wait her Mr.Right, thrusting her into one member of “Hen Jia Nv” group, a Chinese network buzzword created to describe single women over thirty who are dying to find a life partner under the deep influence of their family or friends. She cries when everyone attempts to persuade her to leave him, and this sadness is not simply out of their oppositions, but due to her remorse for missing so many opportunities to find her Mr.

Right, thus reducing herself to this situation. Yang Tao’s anxiety and sadness fully vindicate that she is subjected to the social construction of women: women is a commodity waiting to be brought in the marriage market, and their value is descending with age. She becomes the principle of her own subjection. By this very fact, the external power may throw off its physical weight; it tends to the non-corporal; and, the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound and permanent are its effects.(Foucault 1995:229)

From Yang’s mother who shakes Yang’s will through acting to be desperate to arouse her filial piety, to her colleagues making her feel shameful, and to elders who deprive her of her self-confidence, there is no need of the external voices to urge Yang Tao to marry any more, a inner voice dwelt on her soul supervises her action. Her self-reproach upgrades when Guo Ran unveils the deceptive nature of Gao Jian, resulting in her accusing Guo Ran of being an “evil” when she is actually blaming herself for having postponed her personal affair so that she will never find the right one. A perpetual victory that avoids any physical confrontation and which is always decided in advance (Foucault 1995:229) is achieved now under the joint efforts of the whole society.

A different kind of discipline appears in another TV series named *Destiny by Love* (2013), which was aired during the prime time on CCTV1 and CCTV8. The thirty-one-years-old female protagonist Liu Lin suffers from gamophobia, having no intention to find a partner. Even after she is sweet on a man with great economic conditions and splendid appearance, the tiredness of maintaining this relationship prevents her from going further. Thus punishment falls on Liu Lin’s body: she is diagnosed as terminal cancer. Moreover, this punishment is not just the epitome of tyrannical social regulation about marriage, but the psychic subjection of Liu Lin herself. Susan Sontag points out that health means “the silence of organs” and disease is “their revolt”. Disease is what speaks through the body, a language for dramatizing the mental: a form of self expression, “a symbol, a representation of something going on within...” (Sontag 2001:36) The revolt of Liu Lin’s organs expresses her mental or even physical conflict between subjection and rebellion, or to go further, Liu Lin is already in herself the effect of a subjection much more profound than herself. Except for the physical suffering, punishment is also inflicted on Liu Lin in the form of economic exploitation. Liu Lin’s lover, Lu Xinuo, the director of a big real estate company, forces Liu’s boss to fire her otherwise the future cooperation between two firms will be impossible, after which, Lu refuses to hire unknowing Liu Lin who is inclined to applying for a job in Lu’s company. What’s more, he takes advantage of his position to withdraw the ninety-percent discount on houses promised by his company to Liu Lin, asking her to pay back the money saved in discount.

Similar with the sovereign of the Middle Ages in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, Lu Xinuo is in charge of the same power to exact the “vengeance”, and more importantly, both of them have the power that could suspend vengeance (Foucault 1995:115). Lu is capable of paying generous prices to get Liu back to work, and complementing the money she lacks to help her buy the house, and even magically figuring out the therapy to cure her cancer, which is followed by their marriage, and everything seems to be perfectly well-reasoned and logical. Lu Xinuo alone remains master, he alone can wash away the offences committed on his person. (Foucault 1995:115) Through emancipating Liu Lin from economic exploitation and physical suffering, Lu exerts his power completely to control Liu’s body. After her body experiences the most direct and severe punishment taking the form of sickness, her psychological defense is crumbling. According to Foucault, mind as the surface of inscription for power is the prerequisite for the submission of bodies, but in this TV series, the contrary is proved true, the instinct for survival results in the docility of Liu Lin’s body, and further facilitates her psychic subjection, leading to her final agreement to marry him. No matter what kind of discipline, the media transmits the same social regulation about “leftover women” repeatedly.

For punishment is directed above all at others, at all the potentially guilty. So these obstacle-signs that are gradually engraved in the representation of the condemned man must therefore circulate rapidly and widely; they must be accepted and redistributed by all; they must shape the discourse that each individual has with others and by which crime is forbidden to all by all. (Foucault 1995:217) Analogously, these hot TV series instill the idea that avoiding to be a “leftover woman” is necessary and marriage is the best destination of women’s life voyage in audiences through punishing the guilty women who are still single over thirties in stories.

The punishment turns into signs, coded sets of representations, which will be given the most rapid circulation and the most general acceptance possible by people witnessing the scene of punishment, (Foucault 1995:145) warning other potential “leftover women”, forcing them to marry without taking their own feelings into consideration because their feelings are supposed to be “wrong”, as what happens on female protagonists in TV series. However, it necessary to be known that there is never “wrong” or “right”, but only choices, and those women in the stories finally choose to marry is not for doing the right thing, but out of the physical and psychic subjection shaping in the process of social disciplining.

Conclusion

The analysis of the term “leftover women” finds that the origin of “leftover” is based on an unreasonable logic that women who are still single at a certain age are left and rejected by men without concerning whether they are willing to be single or not. Such naming successfully constructs the social value that women should be defined by men and marriage, not themselves. And the most contributing force in this process is the state media, in which leftover women are constructed as a problem waiting to be solved, and the society is responsible for working together to help them find a husband.

As an indispensable part of the social media, TV series is responsible for the value orientation of the public. The examination of female protagonists who are all leftover women in four TV series of recent several years which are *In Time with You*, *Let's Get Married*, *Blind Date* and *Destiny by Love* respectively, finds that all these TV series instil the idea that avoiding to be a leftover woman is necessary and marriage is the best destination of women's life voyage in audiences through punishing the guilty women who are still single over thirties in stories. Disciplined by punishment, women are submissive psychically, and their imprisoned soul further jails their body, thus passive choice of marriage is inevitable now.

To conclude, Chinese society is still trying every means to drag women back home, and the social value constructed by the state media makes the real freedom of women impossible. In addition, there are some questions waiting to be discussed: how to make sure that whether women choose to marry out of desire or out of social pressure? If out of desire, then, whose desire? Is this desire constructed by society or their instinct? Even though this paper does not touch these questions, they are quite important to figure out the next step toward the final freedom of women.

References:

- Bourdieu, Pierre. (2001) *Masculine Domination*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Marx, Karl & Engels, Frederick. (1972) *Selected works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Volume II)* Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Qu, N. N. From “Males and females should be treated differently” to “Men are supposed to be superior to women”: The Turn of women's Theory in Han Dynasty and the Analysis of its causes. *Battlefront of Thought*, 2016. 2(42): 126.
- Foucault, Michael. (1979) *Omnes et Singulatum: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason'*. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values. Stanford University.
- Wang, X. Z. Reflection on the Political Phenomenology: "Half the Sky" : On the Reconstruction of the Status and role of Women in New China. *Sea of Knowledge*. 2020. 5(3): 32.
- Dai, J. H. Class, Gender and Social Rhetoric. (2007) *Cross-cultural Studies: What Is Comparative Literature?* Beijing: Beijing University Press.
- Fincher, L. H. (2014) *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*. London: Zed Books.
- Li, Y. M. & Wei L. (2013) *The Language Situation in China*. Berlin: De Gruyten Mouton.
- Chen, Y. H & Lv, C. Leftover Women: A Pseudo-proposition. *Sea of Knowledge*. 2011.2(29): 47.
- Attention-economy. Retrieved from <https://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/attention-economy>.
- Foucault, Michael. (1995) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*. New York: A Division of Random House. Inc.
- Zhou, Y. & Zhang, W. X. The Discourse of “Leftover Women” and Media Culture. *Academic Journal of Zhongzhou*. 2014. 6(6): 104.
- Zhang, Q. H. Women's Writing in the New Age: Dilemma or Opportunity? *The Great Wall*. 2009.
- Cai, Y. *Studies on the literature of leftover Women since the 1990s*. (Dissertation). University Of Science and Technology Of Hunan, Hunan.
- Feldshuh, H. “Gender, Media, and Myth-Making: Constructing China's Leftover Women.” *Asian Journal of Communication*. 2018. 28 (1): 38–54.
- Yu, Y. Metaphorical representations of “leftover women”: between traditional patriarchy and modern egalitarianism. *Social Semiotics*. 2019: 13.

- Shen, H. Postmodern Interpretation of urban "leftover women" phenomenon. *Chinese Youth Studies*. 2010. 5(05): 10-3.
- Gao, X. J. Sociological interpretation of "Leftover Women are difficult to marry". *Journal of Beijing Youth University for Political Science*. 2011, 1(01).
- Gaetano, Arianne. 'Leftover Women': Postponing Marriage and Renegotiating Womanhood in Urban China. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*. 2014, 2: 124-49.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge. 1993.
- Hu, K. Q. The influence of Foucault's body theory on feminism and its limitations. *Journal of China University of Mining and Technology (Social Science edition)*. 2010. 6(02): 142.
- Hall, Stuart. *The Work of Representation*. London: Sage. 2002: 43
- In Time with You*. 我可能不会爱你 (Wo Ke Neng Bu Hui Ai Ni). (2012). *Television Series*. China: Hunan Satellite TV.
- Blind Date*. 盲约 (Mang Yue). (2017). *Television Series*. China: Zhejiang Satellite TV.
- Let's Get Married*. 咱们结婚吧 (Zan Men Jie Hun Ba). (2013). *Television Series*. China: CCTV-1.
- Butler, Judith. (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Destiny by Love*. 非缘勿扰 (Fei Yuan Wu Rao). (2013). *Television Series*. China: CCTV-1; CCTV-8.
- Sontag, Susan. (2001) *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS as Its Metaphors*. New York: Picador.