China’s gender imbalance and its implications for human trafficking, social stability, and economic development

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China's marriage crash: more than just numbers

China's marriage rate has plummeted to its lowest level since records began in the 1980s. In 2024, marriage registrations across the country totalled 6.1 million, a decline from 7.7 million the year before. This decline has prompted a Chinese national political adviser to propose lowering the legal marriage age to 18. Currently, the legal marriage age in China is 22 for men and 20 for women, among the highest in the world.

Despite this historic decline, the number of foreign brides, mostly from Southeast Asia – including both trafficked women and those who enter China illegally for marriage – seems quietly rising. About two months ago, China's top political advisory body, the CPPCC, held a meeting on strengthening the management of cross-border marriages, with a primary focus on the 'illegal cross-border marriages.'

In addition, last March, China's Ministry of Public Security launched a nationwide campaign against the transnational trafficking of women and children, calling for stronger international cooperation to eradicate such crimes.

Yet, addressing marriage solely through statistics and border enforcement overlooks deeper social issues. Behind these figures lie significant struggles for those who desire marriage but remain unable to achieve it, raising critical questions about the broader social and ethical consequences for China and the international community.

Understanding China's marriage crash

This historic low in the marriage rate is driven by a combination of economic pressures, shifting gender expectations, evolving social attitudes toward marriage, and higher levels of education. In particular, urban women are increasingly pushing back against traditional gender roles, including expectations around reproduction, that prioritise domestic responsibilities over career aspirations. Meanwhile, rising living costs, especially soaring housing prices, have made marriage an unaffordable prospect for many young people.

This resistance is further exacerbated by China's longstanding gender imbalance, a legacy of the sweeping one-child policy and a cultural preference for male children. This is particularly pronounced among those born in the 1980s – a generation I belong to – due to the widespread use of ultrasound technology from the mid-1980s onwards. The ability to determine a fetus's sex as early as 14 to 16 weeks, combined with the drastic one-child policy and a deep-rooted preference for sons, offered parents the ability to terminate pregnancies if their child was female. This led to a sustained and severe gender imbalance. At its peak, China's sex ratio at birth reached 121.2 boys for every 100 girls, with some provinces exceeding 130.

To put the number into context, China's gender imbalance could persist until 2050, with projections suggesting that up to 50 million men may remain unmarried. Reluctantly, they have become part of the 'Era of Leftover Men' (*shengnan shidai*), an internet term loosely referring to the period from 2020 to 2050, when China is expected to have 30 to 50 million unmarried men, primarily from impoverished rural areas, who are unable to find wives. The conundrum is that most 'leftover' men want to marry but cannot find or afford a spouse. A widely used phrase in China, "difficulty in getting married" (*jiehun nan*), encapsulates this struggle.

The surge in 'purchased' foreign brides

With more men competing for a comparatively small pool of women, a phenomenon known as 'marriage squeeze' has emerged – where those with fewer resources are increasingly pushed out of this fierce competition driven by demographic imbalance.

So, who will these 'leftover' men marry? Probably no one knows the exact answer. As members of the generation born in the late 1980s, we came of age in a time when gender-based sex selection was largely unchecked. Personally, I know that some of my peers from primary and secondary school have been desperately searching for a wife but remain 'leftover' men.

Unable to find a domestic spouse, many turn to 'purchasing' (*maihun*) foreign brides. For many Chinese men, especially those in rural areas, transnational marriages seemingly offer a viable solution to the domestic spouse shortage. The growing demand for brides has led to a surge in illegal and trafficked marriages – including child brides – particularly involving women from Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam, Myanmar, and Laos.

Determining the extent of illegal cross-border marriages in China is challenging due to the clandestine nature of these activities. But the most recent data from the UK's Home Office suggests that 75% of Vietnamese human-trafficking victims were smuggled to China, with women and children making up 90% of cases.

For example, the award-winning documentary *The Woman from Myanmar* follows the story of a trafficked Myanmar woman who was sold into marriage in China. The film exposes the harsh realities faced by many trafficked brides. It captures not only the coercion and abuse these women endure but also their struggle for autonomy and survival in a system that treats them as commodities – valued primarily as reproductive tools rather than as individuals. Often arranged through informal networks or commercial agencies—both illegal according to China's State Council – these marriages raise ethical concerns about human trafficking, exploitation, and the commodification of women.

While years ago, China and other Southeast Asian countries rescued thousands of victims trafficked into China for marriage, such cases continue to surface today in news reports and police investigations. A few months ago, Chinese authorities prosecuted individuals involved in an illegal cross-border matchmaking scheme, in which men were lured into costly 'marriage tours' abroad with promises of affordable foreign wives.

In November 2024, for example, two people were prosecuted over their involvement in an illegal cross-border matchmaking scheme. This incident underscores the continued risks associated with the underground market for foreign brides, where fraudulent schemes and human trafficking remain rampant.

Indeed, illegal marriage networks are exploiting the eagerness of Chinese 'leftover' men, driving the rise of a black market. Police authorities constantly warn of scams involving undocumented foreign brides from Southeast Asia, who take advantage of the situation, sometimes disappearing with large sums of money before marriage arrangements are completed.

In one case, a Cambodian woman, Mao Sretpich, fled with a bride price of 180,000 yuan (approximately $25,000) just hours after the payment. She was arrested weeks later, sentenced to one year and eight months in prison, fined, and ordered deported by a Jiangxi court.

Shifting gender dynamics

Ironically, the practice of sex-selective abortion has led to a scarcity of women, increasing the relative value of those who unknowingly escaped this selection mechanism.

The marriage crisis and the rise of transnational marriages reflect deeper shifts in China's gender dynamics. Traditional family expectations, which emphasise marriage and childbearing as essential life milestones, are increasingly at odds with the realities faced by young Chinese people. Women, in particular, are challenging these norms, seeking greater autonomy and equality in both personal and professional spheres.

At the same time, the growing demand for foreign brides highlights the persistence of patriarchal attitudes in some segments of Chinese society. Many men seeking transnational marriages still expect their wives to conform to traditional gender roles – just as Larry, the trafficked woman in the documentary, said: 'Birthing babies [giving birth] was her true source of value'.

What China's marriage crash means for the future

The marriage crisis and its associated trends have far-reaching implications for China's demographic future. A shrinking and aging population, coupled with a growing number of

unmarried men, poses significant challenges for the country's economic growth and social stability.

Economically, a widely known saying is that China is 'growing old before it gets rich' due to its low birth rate and aging population. Even so, Beijing is resisting this characterisation, saying that constant technological innovations will continue to drive economic growth. The labour force is undoubtedly important when it comes to economic growth. But, according to Justin Lin Yifu, a member of the CPPCC, what matters more is effective labor, which is the product of both the quantity and quality of labour force. China has increased its investment in education significantly in anticipation of challenges surrounding its ageing population.

However, notwithstanding this, an even greater concern is the large number of 'leftover' men, which could pose a serious threat to social stability. Studies have shown a positive relationship between high male-to-female sex ratios and crime rates in both China and India – two of the countries with the highest numbers of 'leftover' men. Higher sex ratios are significantly linked to increased crimes, particularly against women. For example, in China, distorted male sex ratios can account for up to 14% of the rise in crime, while in India, a 5.5% rise in the male sex ratio would increase the odds of unmarried women being harassed by more than 20%.

As the number of 'leftover' men continues to rise in China, Beijing faces a demographic time bomb with profound implications for social stability, economic development, and even geopolitical tensions. Ultimately, the question of who these soon-to-be – or already – 30 to 50 million 'leftover' men will marry has become a pressing issue for Beijing. The government's response will likely shape the country's future for decades to come.