

Not Enough Women in China? Let Men Share a Wife, an Economist Suggests



Men playing checkers in Beijing. By 2020, China will have an estimated 30 million bachelors. Ed Jones/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“No one is forcing anyone to accept ‘one wife, many husbands!’ ”

With that bracing statement, [Xie Zuoshi](#), an economics professor at Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, defended his recent [proposal](#) that [one solution to China’s huge surplus of single men](#) could be to allow polyandry, or multiple husbands. The proposal has gone viral.

Legalizing marriage between two men would also be a good idea, Mr. Xie wrote in a post that has since been removed from his blogs. (He has at least three blogs, and his [Sina blog](#) alone has more than 2.6 million followers.)

By 2020, China will have an estimated 30 million bachelors — called *guanggūn*, or “bare branches.” Birth control policies that have limited many families to one child since 1979, a cultural preference for boys and the widespread, if illegal, practice of sex-selective abortion have contributed to a gender imbalance that hovers around 117 boys born for every 100 girls.

Mr. Xie wrote that he was approaching the problem from a purely economic point of view.

Many men, especially poor ones, he noted, are unable to find a wife and have children, and are subsequently condemned to living and dying alone without offspring to support them in old age, as children are required to do by law in China. But he says he believes there is a solution.

"I don't deny the fact of 30 million *guanggun*, but I deny that this must lead to severe social problems," he wrote.

A shortage raises the price of goods, in this case, women, he explained. Rich men can afford them, but poor men are priced out. This can be solved by having two men share the same woman.

"With so many *guanggun*, women are in short supply and their value increases," he wrote. "But that doesn't mean the market can't be adjusted. The *guanggun* problem is actually a problem of income. High-income men can find a woman because they can pay a higher price. What about low-income men? One solution is to have several take a wife together. That's not just my weird idea. In some remote, poor places, brothers already marry the same woman, and they have a full and happy life."

Polyandry has been [practiced before in China](#), particularly in impoverished areas, as a way to pool resources and avoid the breakup of property.

And apparently, there are Chinese who think polyandry may already be legal: The Internet has [sites posing the question](#), especially for people born after 1990, among whom the gender gap is especially large.

Much of the online response to Mr. Xie's proposal has been outrage.

"Is this a human being speaking?" a user with the handle *dihuihui* wrote on Weibo.

"Trash-talking professor, many single guys want to ask, 'Where's your wife?' " a user who identified as *Shanyu jinxiang1887003537* wrote.

Attempts to contact Mr. Xie on Monday were unsuccessful.

On Sunday, he published an indignant rebuttal on one of his blogs, accusing his critics of being driven by empty notions of traditional morality that are impractical and selfish, even hypocritical.

“Because I promoted the idea that we should allow poor men to marry the same woman to solve the problem of 30 million *guanggun*, I’ve been endlessly abused,” he wrote. “People have even telephoned my university to harass me. These people have groundlessly accused me of promoting immoral and unethical ideas.

“If you can’t find a solution that doesn’t violate traditional morality,” he continued, “then why do you criticize me for violating traditional morality? You are in favor of a couple made up of one man, one woman. But your morality will lead to 30 million *guanggun* with no hope of finding a wife. Is that your so-called morality? Think of it like this: If you were a *guanggun*, would you still be in favor of one man, one woman?”

In addition to provoking guardians of traditional morality, the proposal has been pilloried by feminists and gay rights advocates.

“Men are publicly debating how to allocate women, as though women were commodities like houses or cars, in order to realize some grand political ideal originating from either the patriarchal left or the patriarchal right,” Zheng Churan, one of five women’s rights activists detained in March while campaigning, wrote in an essay for a WeChat group called Groundbreaking. “Behind the imbalanced sex ratio of 30 million bachelors lie 30 million baby girls who died due to sex discrimination. But somehow everyone’s still crying that some men can’t find wives.”

An advocate using the name A Qiang rejected Mr. Xie’s argument that legalizing same-sex marriage would help solve China’s bachelor crisis, accusing him of prioritizing the needs of straight men over those of gay men — even though Mr. Xie’s proposal did include the suggestion that men be allowed to marry men.

“This professor’s logic is typical heterosexual-male-centrism,” A Qiang wrote. “If heterosexual men can’t find a wife they can share one, thereby solving heterosexual men’s marriage problems by turning women into material goods. The legalization of same-sex marriage therefore is not to secure marriage equality for L.G.B.T. people, but to save women for straight men. This is on the same level as comments that go: ‘Let these men be homosexual to save more women for me.’ ”

Many gay men in China marry women to conform socially and to have children.

Mr. Xie also seems to have supporters. On his Sina blog, he posted a comment from a student at Nanchang Hangkong University.

“You are standing alongside the poorest working-class people. Hold on to your

convictions at all costs and regardless of criticism,” the student wrote, adding: “When there’s no better way, why don’t we get rid of so-called ‘morality’ and solve society’s problems? If we simply leave 30 million bachelors in this country to die without children or spouses simply because of morality, wouldn’t that be dogmatic and unethical?”

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