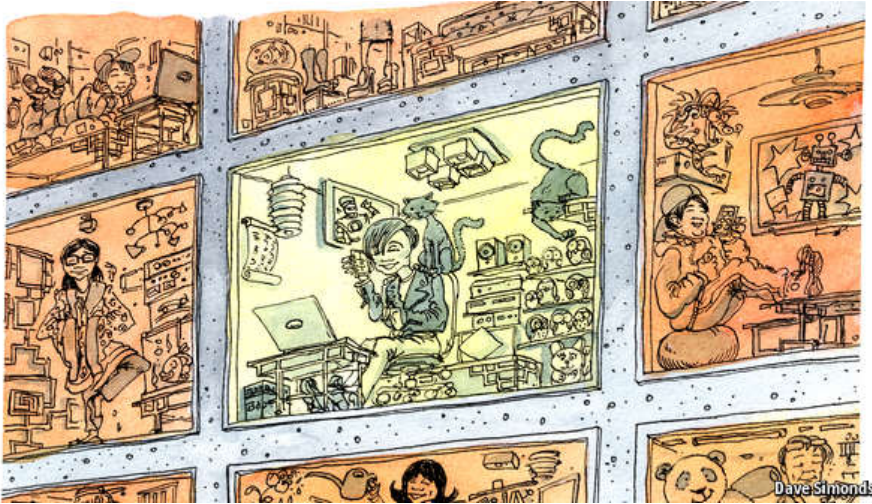


Family

Young, single and what about it?

This article looks at the sharp rise in young Chinese happy to live by themselves next at old people less happy to do so

Aug 29th 2015 | BEIJING | From the print edition



IN HER tiny flat, which she shares with two cats and a flock of porcelain owls, Chi Yingying describes her parents as wanting to be the controlling shareholders in her life. Even when she was in her early 20s, her mother raged at her for being unmarried. At 28 Ms Chi took “the most courageous decision of my life” and moved into her own home. Now 33, she relishes the privacy—at a price: her monthly rent of 4,000 yuan (\$625) swallows nearly half her salary.

In many countries leaving the family home well before marriage is a rite of passage. But in China choosing to live alone and unmarried as Ms Chi has done is eccentric verging on taboo. Chinese culture attaches a particularly high value to the idea that families should live together. Yet ever more people are living alone.

In the decade to 2010 the number of single-person households doubled. Today over 58m Chinese live by themselves, according to census data, a bigger number of one-person homes than in America, Britain and France combined. Solo dwellers make up 14% of all households. That is still low compared with rates found in Japan or Taiwan (see chart), but the proportion will certainly increase.

The pattern of Chinese living alone is somewhat different from that in the West, because tens of millions of (mainly poor) migrant workers have moved away from home to find work in more prosperous regions of China; many in this group live alone, often in shoeboxes. Yet for the most part younger Chinese living alone are from among the better-off. “Freedom and new wealth” have broken China’s traditional family structures, says Jing Jun of Tsinghua University in Beijing.

The better-educated under-30-year-olds are, and the more money they have, the more likely they are to live alone. Rich parts of China have more non-widowed single dwellers: in Beijing a fifth of homes house only one person. The marriage age is rising, particularly in big cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou, where the average man marries after 30

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and the average woman at 28, older than their American counterparts. Divorce rates are also increasing, though they are still much lower than in America. More than 3.5m Chinese couples split up each year, which adds to the number of single households.

For some, living alone is a transitional stage on the way to marriage, remarriage or family reunification. But for a growing number of people it may be a permanent state. In cities, many educated, urban women stay single, often as a positive choice—a sign of rising status and better employment opportunities. Rural areas, by contrast, have a skewed sex ratio in which men outnumber women, a consequence of families preferring sons and aborting female fetuses or abandoning baby girls. The consequence is millions of reluctant bachelors.

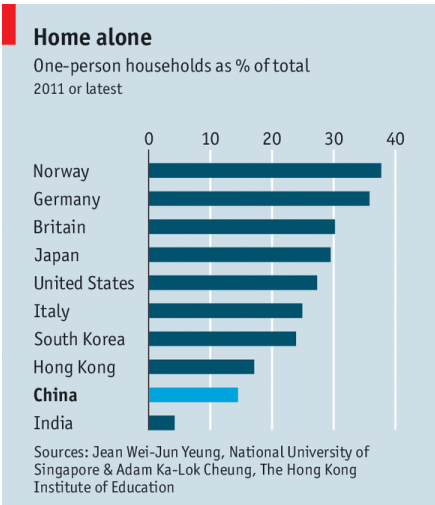
In the past, adulthood in China used, almost without exception, to mean marriage and having children within supervised rural or urban structures. Now a growing number of Chinese live beyond prying eyes, able to pursue the social and sexual lives they choose.

In the long run that poses a political challenge: the love of individual freedom is something that the Chinese state has long tried to quash. Living alone does not have to mean breaching social norms—phones and the internet make it easier than ever to keep in touch with relations, after all. Yet loosening family ties may open up space for new social networks, interest groups, even political aspirations of which the state may come to disapprove.

For now those who live alone are often subject to mockery. Unmarried females are labelled “leftover women”; unmarried men, “bare branches”—for the family tree they will never grow. An online group called “women living alone” is stacked with complaints about being told to “get a boyfriend”.

Even eating out can be a trial, since Chinese food culture is associated with groups of people sharing a whole range of dishes. After repeated criticism for dining alone, in 2014 Yanni Cai, a Shanghai journalist, wrote “Eating Alone”, a book on how singletons can adapt Chinese cuisine to make a single plate a meal in itself. According to tradition, even a frugal Chinese meal comprises “four dishes and one soup”. A single diner is likely to find that rather too much to stomach.

From the print edition: China



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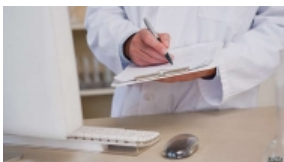
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