

**Artist's Interview, commissioned by The Dock:  
Jialin Long in conversation with Aoife Herrity**

**Introduction:**

Jialin Long is a visual artist living in Ireland. Her practice focuses on social constructs in her homeland of China. Long's current research looks at 'ShengNv', a term meaning 'Leftover Women' which describes unmarried women in their late twenties or older. As part of her research, Long interviewed unmarried Chinese women aged thirty and older: these women in particular face tremendous societal pressure to marry, despite being also taught that professional success was achievable through independence.

Over a number of weeks, Long met with visual artist Aoife Herrity to discuss ongoing research and share works in progress. In this conversation, both artists discuss Jialin's ongoing project, which focuses on the Chinese government's family planning policy and its impact on contemporary society in China. They discuss the research behind Jialin's previous work, 'The Leftover Women,' and her current work in progress.

**Aoife Herrity**

*So when you arrived at this work [The Leftover Women (ShengNv)] first, was it that you were looking at the fact that you had kids? Or that you had turned 30? What was the pull for you to begin this work?*

**Jialin Long**

*I did this work after I had kids. But before I started studying arts, I experienced the period where I received tension and pressure from my family to get married. The desire to do something with my camera was sparked by seeing many of my childhood girlfriends struggle to find a husband once they passed the age of 30. This ultimately led me to start the project focused on the issue of women in China who are of marriageable age and facing societal pressure to get married and have children before the age of 30.*

**Aoife Herrity**

*Just out of interest, what age were you when you got married?*

**Jialin Long**

*I got engaged when I was 26 and got married when I was 27.*

**Aoife Herrity**

*So was the feeling of that pressure very real for you?*

**Jialin Long**

*Yes, absolutely. I assume the women living in China faced even more pressure than I had. By the time I turned 25, I was working as an engineer for an Irish firm, and my husband who was my boyfriend [at the time], just finished his college degree in Ireland.*



“Pressure from society to get married and have children before the age of 30 is very high. People think at this age it’s normal to be divorced, but you’re not normal if you’re not married.”

Wang Jiaying, born in 1984

**Aoife Herrity**

*Can you talk about how that sort of ties in with the civic messaging that’s been received in China? As well as between families; so, civic as well as social? How do these ‘rules’ tie into marriage?*

**Jialin Long**

*I grew up in a culture where the one-child policy was strictly enforced. When I was growing up, there was rules and expectations to follow at a different age for a person. When you’re in school, you need to focus on studying, not looking for romance. Parents and teachers do not allow that to happen, but when you graduated from college, women face the reality that they might soon become leftover women if they don’t have a boyfriend to marry.*

**Aoife Herrity**

*Can you talk a bit more about that, is that where there are more women than men are there? Or just maybe, elaborate on why that's the case?*

**Jialin Long**

*Only when I was working on the project, through my research, I realised the term 'leftover women' was actually invented for our generation. The one-child policy was implemented in the late 1970s and I was born in the 1980s. Most families are only allowed to have one child. But in Chinese culture, people want the boys to carry the family name, especially in rural areas. So the enforcement of the one-child policy caused many baby girls to be abandoned or they were aborted. 20 years later, when looking at the ratio of men to women in the marriageable age group, there are many more men than women. This leads to men reaching the marriageable age, but being unable to find a wife. To compensate for this gender imbalance, the government started to promote a culture of shame to persuade women into marriage at an early age. That's how this derogatory term 'Leftover Women' came out. 'Leftover Women' is a new word coined in 2006. It has been added to the Chinese language to refer to women who have passed the age of marriage generally considered by society but are still unmarried.*

**Aoife Herrity**

*So they invented this stigma; that if you're a certain age, and you're a woman... they've created this new pressure. You have to get married younger. You have to have more children. What about the family planning policy now? Is it like a reverse of the one-child policy? Or a backlash of the one-child policy, now they want more children? What is the purpose behind it?*



ShengNv confetti

**Jialin Long**

*The purpose of family planning is to control the population, but the one-child policy has done long-term damage and the government only realised it after implementing it for 30 years. When they realised the birth rate was much lower than previous predictions for the past ten years, they gradually loosened the one-child policy. Starting with if both the husband and wife are only one child in each family, the couple can have two children since 2011. However, the birth rate didn't catch up as expected. Then In 2013, the government changed the family planning to either the husband or the wife as the only child, the couple is allowed to have two children. And in 2015, they decided that every couple is allowed to have a second child. Finally, after census data showed a steep decline in birth rates, the three-child policy came into play. This means China will allow couples to have up to three children from May 2021.*

**Aoife Herrity**

*Is there any reason why instead of targeting these 'Leftover Women that they are looking at couples that are already married? Or families that already have kids?*

**Jialin Long**

*So, the family planning policy is targeting married couples. In China, if you have a child before marriage it will invite a lot of trouble. There is an order in place you are expected to follow. The instructions are everywhere. You need to first get married, with your marriage certificate, you can apply for permission to have your first child. When your child is born, you'll be able to register your child on a book called Hukou. After that, if you're eligible to have a second child, you need to apply for permission to get pregnant for your second child. I heard from a friend who lives in Ireland and had children with her partner but they didn't get married. When she tried to get their children Chinese passports, she got stuck.*

**Aoife Herrity**

*Sorry to deviate a little bit but are there many children in China that are born outside of marriage and are adopted? Is that something that happens? Or, you just don't have a child if it's outside of marriage?*

**Jialin Long**

*Well, it's a huge problem. To be honest, I don't have first-person experience with that. But every Chinese person has their personal details in a book called HuKou. If you don't have it right, there will be problems that when the child is at the age to go to school, and many things in life relate to this book.*

**Aoife Herrity**

*Wow. So it follows them for their life. Okay, let's circle back to the Leftover Women, because it kind of overlaps, like the child policy. It's sort of difficult to separate.*

**Jialin Long**

*Exactly, I find it challenging to work on this subject, because I find the context are related, but they're also different.*

**Aoife Herrity**

*Yeah. It feels like it can't exist on its own. There's a correlation. Could you talk a bit more about the idea of the signs?*

**Jialin Long**

*They're like the ones in my images, normally the texts are on a red banner made with fabric ties between the trees on street.*



1980

Having only one child is the best option, the state will take care of you when you're old.



2011-2015

Having one child is too few while having two children is just the right amount. One\* child gets married, and the other one\* takes care of you when you're old.



2021

Having three children is the best option, you don't need the state to take care of you when you're old.

\*The first "one" refers to a daughter, and the second "one" refers to a son. A common cultural belief is when the daughter gets married, she's become a part of her husband's family, but the son will remain in your family for life.

**Aoife Herrity**

*Okay, so, just for context, to get an idea of how often you encounter these signs in your everyday. Are they at the train station, the way you'd see advertising? Or are they coming through your letterbox or on the TV? Do you see them every day?*

**Jialin Long**

*Yes. You see these instructions all the time. It's a bit like how often you see during COVID, the signs are in the environment constantly. From time to time, the instructions are changing, and it might not suit everyone when a new policy comes out. But generally, people need to follow these guidances. As mentioned earlier, I was born in this social structure where everything has been planned at a different stage. So you're supposed to do certain things at a certain age. Say, when you're at school, you need to focus on studying. Students are not allowed to have a relationship. So if you secretly date a boyfriend or a girlfriend, and if that's been found out by your teacher, or your parents, you will sit down together at a table, to have a serious talk.*

**Aoife Herrity**

*And is the serious talk that if you're dating someone, then you have to marry them? Or is it that you're that you just can't be dating?*

**Jialin Long**

*No, you can't be dating at all, because, at this age, you're supposed to study.*

**Aoife Herrity**

*Okay, so is post-primary education the first time that you're permitted to look for a partner?*

**Jialin Long**

*Generally speaking, it's when you graduate from secondary school. But a lot of families still think it's too early. So when you're in college, parents try to watch your personal life a lot. This generation (from the 1980s onwards) has mostly one child in their family, so parents are really protective. The average age for people starting college is eighteen or nineteen years old. But I think after 20, if the woman is still single, she might hear some words urging her to get a boyfriend. Because by the age of 25, you are supposed to talk about marriage.*

**Aoife Herrity**

*Okay, so you have five years of casual dating?*

**Jialin Long**

*Well, you have a very small window for casual dating. By that I mean, some families do even not approve of that, they think you should finish college before dating. But when you graduated from college, the average age will be 22 years old, so the girl will only have three years of dating before she turns into a 'Leftover Woman'.*

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Graduation - 22 years old - 3 years left to be 25!  
Getting married counting down

### **Aoife Herrity**

*Wow. Does that include finding a partner, getting engaged, and getting married? So there's no space for casual dating. Is that everyone that's dating with a view to marriage?*

### **Jialin Long**

*No. If everyone plays by the book, there won't be many leftover women, right? Just use me as an example. So when I was in college I started seeing someone, and then progressed to a committed relationship. You see how it goes between the two of you. But that's us. Parents and elderly relatives around you have different views. They will check by your age and tell you, at this age, you're supposed to do this, to do that... So there is always combat between the child in their twenties and their family.*

### **Aoife Herrity**

*It's very plotted out, which I mean, Is there ever a scenario where a lot of young people just say; "no, we're all saying no to this. We're not going to do that". Does that ever happen?*



“For girls, age is a big obstacle. Men can find marriageable partners from when they’re 20s through 40s, but women can’t. When a girl is at her 20s, she wants to find someone a little bit older than herself. When she reaches 26, she has to accept men who are eight or ten years older than her. When I just turned into 30, someone introduced me to a widowed man in his fifties. In the eyes of the introducer, you are already 30, what else do you expect?”

Wang Heli, born in 1983

### **Jialin Long**

*Well, based on traditional Chinese culture, the elderly are always right. Younger people don’t have an equal voice as the older ones. In the marriage market, talking about the girls. Although Chinese girls have the equal opportunity as boys to receive an education, after you graduate, suddenly you’re facing this marriage market with people who see you with conservative views. These educated young women don’t like the way it is, then the media invented the term ‘Leftover Women’ to target this group. Also, to blame these young women that being ‘leftover’ is your fault. However, these women are just like every single lady in their twenties, they’d like to follow their own pace on dating and marriage, and having children. Unfortunately, that’s not correct in the societal kind of view.*

### **Aoife Herrity**

*Just to maybe get a bit more understanding of the cultural landscape, for example in Jewish communities they would have a matchmaker or in rural Ireland, they’d have a matchmaking fair...*

### **Jialin Long**

*For Chinese, I think it's the man and woman who are seeing each other who will decide, whether or not they are going to get married, but each party needs to get their parents' approval. So if I bring a man back home, but my parents don't like him, then it's very hard for me to marry him.*



**Aoife Herrity**

*Is it the case because there are more men than women?*

**Jialin Long**

*No, it's different. For men, the assessment criteria are more about the financial side. But for women, it's about your age and ability to bear children. So that'll be the woman's value. Women lose their value when ageing, but men are probably gaining their value when he has more time to make money.*

**Aoife Herrity**

*[laughing] So the men are like wine and the women are like fish!*

**Jialin Long**

*[laughing] Oh, that describes it!*

“The common belief is that the older men are, the more valuable they are. As your experience increases and your social status increases, the value of men increases with age.” “Money is the best halo for a man.”

— — Wang Heli



Based on The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, the most ideal age for childbearing is before the age of 30. "Proper age childbearing is beneficial to the intelligence and health of offspring".

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The ability to bear children is the value that women bring to society.

**Aoife Herrity**

*This is what I find so strange, yes, age is a massive factor. But you could be 22 and have issues conceiving, or you could be 31 and be very fertile. In most cases, it's an indication, but it's not absolute. I don't have any hard facts to back this up. But my perception is just globally, people are having children later in life. There is no argument for these women; they can have children at thirty-one or forty-one.*

**Jialin Long**

*Well, one woman in my interview, particularly talked about the societal expectation of a woman's age, she used the word "red line" to mark a marriageable aged woman. She said: "For Chinese women, the societal expectation is, at 30 years old, it's a red line for you to get married, 35 years old is a red line for a woman to settle your career, and 37 to 40 years old is the red line for bearing children." So imagine these red lines are marks for choosing a woman for a man, age certainly becomes the first factor.*



Zhang Yuwei, 1982

*"At the time I was 29 when I was about to turn 30. I realised that the most important mate selection period in life has passed, and 30 years old is a red line for Chinese women."*

**Aoife Herrity**

*I see there are some computer-generated images, can you tell me why you're including them in your work?*

**Jialin Long**

*We have talked a lot about family planning policies, and the cultural expectation for a woman. But for my work, I want to provoke it in an ironic way, making the viewer see how ridiculous these rules are for living human beings. These societal expectations for a woman shaped a standardised female figure, but in reality, there are so many variations. So I decided to experiment with AI in creating the ideal version of Chinese women who fulfilled all of the requirements. And I like the fact that these portraits don't look real.*



a successful Chinese woman who has accomplished  
a thriving career, a loving husband, and two beautiful children, by the age of 35