Marriage a click away for China’s desperate bachelors

A decades-long one-child policy has created a demographic disparity, with tens of millions more men than women.

Divorced, in his 40s and fearing a solitary future, Zhou Xinsen went online like thousands of other Chinese men to find an affordable and fast solution to bachelordom — a Vietnamese bride.

He was among millions of his gender struggling on the sidelines of China’s ultra competitive marriage market, where a decades-long one-child policy and sex-selective abortions of daughters has resulted in a massive gender gap.

Bare branches
“It’s very hard for people my age to find a Chinese wife,” 41-year-old Mr. Zhou said.

Single men are known as “bare branches”, a pejorative term in a country where pressure to marry and extend the family tree is sharp.

Running out of time, Mr. Zhou forked out nearly $20,000 to find his second wife — a 26-year-old from Vietnam who he relocated to Jiangsu province.

Mr. Zhou then opened his own match-making business.

He charges around 120,000 yuan ($17,400) to connect Chinese men with Vietnamese brides via his website, which shows photos of women aged 20-35 “waiting to be married”.

It’s “profitable”, he says.

A portion of the money from matches is meant to be funnelled back to families in poor Mekong area countries.

While many unions flourish, others quickly lurch into crisis with women disappointed at swapping village poverty in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar for life in rural China.

China’s single men are often older, divorced, disabled or too poor to pay the traditional “bride price” — a dowry in gifts or cash — for a Chinese wife.

Chinese men face a barrage of economic, psychological and cultural pressures to find a wife, says Jiang Quanbao, a professor at Xi’an Jiaotong University’s Institute for Population and Development Studies.

Increasing numbers of women — and teenage girls — from neighbouring countries are kidnapped, tricked or forced into marriage.

Under Chinese law, the abduction and trafficking of women or children is punishable by five to ten years jail. But critics say the law needs updating as the trade surges.

“It’s extremely profitable and there’s no incentive at all for traffickers to stop,” Mimi Vu of the Vietnam-based Pacific Links Foundation, which works to prevent human trafficking.