

Parental matchmaking in China

Peidong Sun

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Ph.D. in Sociology and Law, Peidong Sun is Micheal J. Zak associate professor of History for China and Asia-Pacific Studies at Cornell University and visiting professor at Sciences Po Paris. Much of her research has centered on the history and contemporary implications of Chinese everyday life. She carried them out as an associate professor of history at Fudan University, and as a visiting scholar at Stanford University, at the Harvard Yenching Institute, and at Berkeley. She is the author of *Who Will Marry My Daughter: Parental Matchmaking Corner in Shanghai's People's Square* and *Fashion and Politics: Everyday Clothing in Guangdong Province during the Cultural Revolution*. She is currently working on her third book: *Underground Reading of the Sent-down Generation: History and Memory of the Cultural Revolution*.



AN INEFFICIENT SYSTEM TO DEAL WITH GENERATIONAL ANXIETY

This article is co-written with Jun Zhang,
assistant professor of anthropology at the City University of Hong Kong

Four decades after the launch of market reforms, Shanghai is a leading example of China's embrace of globalization and modernization. Yet every weekend since 2005 in the center of metropolitan Shanghai, middle-aged parents have gathered in People's park to find mates for their college-educated children.

Matchmaking corners of this kind exist in all big and medium cities, such as Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Xi'an. These 'matchmaking corners' seem a jarring revival of 'tradition' in China's most cosmopolitan cities. Moreover, it is a practice that some college-educated daughters with good jobs find totally unnecessary. However, when one listens to parents, their matchmaking efforts seem to be a rational response to the many uncertainties linked to marketization faced by them in late middle age. Why? How and why parents' lived experiences in the Mao era have influenced their strategy and attitude toward the mate choice of their children, who were born in the economic openness era, after 1978?

A paradoxical success of inefficient matchmaking

The efficiency of the matchmaking market is very low. Almost no parents find a good match for their children. But over every weekend and public holidays, more and more parents, usually hundreds of them each time, gather in parks and try their best to find a potential spouse for their children. Our research found that marriage market is thriving because it has released the whole generation's collective anxieties created by the new freedoms of marketization and the increasing individualization. This article explores new expectations of marriage from the parents' perspectives, revealing parental concerns, anxieties, and frustrations about the marriage market in a changing urban environment. Some of our evidence comes from secondary sources, but most of it comes from

hundreds of hours of fieldwork in the matchmaking corner of Shanghai's people's Park. Through extended and sometimes repeated conversations, we built trust with parents and directly witnessed the dynamic process of matchmaking.

What's parental Matchmaking Corner in Shanghai?

People's Park is a central landmark in metropolitan Shanghai, but since June 2005 a corner of the Park has also become a market-like place, serving as a venue for parental matchmaking on weekends and national holidays. Matchmaking is not unusual in contemporary societies, but rarely do parents take as much initiative as those in the matchmaking corners of Chinese cities. Nor is there often such a clearly defined and lively location as in Shanghai.

The "matchmaking corner" in People's park is divided into two sections. The first is the "free zone." Here one observes some seniors looking for partners for themselves, but the majority of participants are parents seeking the best match for their only son or daughter. Parents write down their children's basic information such as age, height, and monthly salary on a piece of paper and then clip them to pieces of string tied between the trees, place them on bushes, or lay them on the ground. Parents sit patiently, waiting for other parents to make inquiries about their children. They also walk around, jotting down the information of those whom they consider candidates for their children. The second section is the "amateur matchmaking zone" where the professional or voluntary matchmakers gather. These matchmakers usually have their own rosters of single youngsters for parents to screen. We did interviews and observations in both sections, but most of our attention focuses on parents in the first zone who sought a spouse for their own child.

Besides parental presence, another distinctive feature in the matchmaking scene is that to-be-matched people are predominately female. The matchmaking agents in the corner distinguish the male candidates from their female counterparts in terms of the handling fee. One of their advertisements made the distinction explicitly: "Amateur Matchmaker: Hundreds of excellent men and women are waiting for you. Free application and recommendations for men. No over-aged women" (over-aged being 25 years old.) Parents of single men can have their sons listed in the rosters for free, while parents of single women had to pay 90 Chinese yuan (roughly US\$12 in 2008). A recurring comment we heard from the parents was that "there are so many excellent girls here, while excellent boys are just scarce." One of our interviewees estimated that the gender ratio here was one man for every ten women, and another even mentioned one for every

twenty. The competition between women candidates is very high. The urban daughters in the matchmaking corner share many characteristics. Usually aged between twenty-five and thirty-five, these young women hold at least a bachelor's degree. They either grew up in Shanghai or moved to Shanghai for work after their college education. They are company employees, civil servants, or professionals such as accountants, lawyers, and research fellows. Thus, by virtue of their occupational position and good education, they represent secure members of China's new middle class.

Who are those parents in the Park?

Parents come from diverse backgrounds and social strata, with ages ranging from fifty to seventy. Some are civil servants, high school teachers, or faculty members; some are managers and small business owners; some are workers. More than half of our interviewees had already retired. In terms of education, most has been to high school; occasionally they had college degrees. Long-term local residents sat side-by-side with newcomers (most of whom has accompanied their children and, in some cases, their spouse to Shanghai). From what we observed, mothers slightly outnumbered fathers. With only a few exceptions, these parents have their own apartments in Shanghai, whether purchased from their work units or obtained from the commercial real estate market. In sum, parents seemed secure and well established in Shanghai. However, when we listened to them explain what they wanted for their children and what drew them to the matchmaking corner, we identified several different strands of anxiety.

Because of the cultural revolution, many of these parents remained single in their early thirties and returned to their home cities as "over-aged youth" whose own marriage problems were seen by some as a socially destabilizing force

Why are parents anxious?

Many of these parents have been sent down to the countryside for reeducation in their teens during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). They consciously chose not to marry in the countryside because they feared it would prevent them from returning to the city if marriage in a village assigned them a permanent rural household registration. As a result, many remained single in their early thirties and returned to their home cities as "over-aged youth" whose own marriage problems were seen by some as a socially destabilizing force. Indeed, in the traditional marriage culture people are expected to do what "they need to do" in the proper time, so that the whole society goes steadily and smoothly. The official state newspaper, *The People's Daily*, published a series of reports addressing this issue, and state organizations such as the Women's Federation, the Youth League, and the Union were called on to organize parties and summer camps, providing channels and services to solve the marriage problems of this particular birth cohort. The mass dating culture of the past left such a strong imprint on this generation's own lives that many parents we interviewed called for government intervention to solve the problems of

their children. The alternative to government intervention was the market, and although almost all parents distrusted commercial matchmaking services, they themselves used the language of the market to describe the matchmaking corner as a venue that provided opportunities to meet with suitors outside their conventional social circles. Nevertheless, despite their constant references to “the market,” parents expressed ambiguous attitude toward the market. While markets offer choices, they also turn people into objects to be selected and imply the loss of dignity and social status. Li Yuan was a mother who felt embarrassed about her presence in the matchmaking corner. She has been a doctor before retirement, and her husband is a retired senior engineer who enjoyed a special allowance from the State Council. They have two apartments in downtown Shanghai. Their daughter has graduated from a prestigious university in Shanghai with a master’s degree and is a faculty member:

“Now I worry about nothing except my child’s marriage. Look at my child: elementary school, junior high, senior high, all the way to Tongji University. After Tongji, she got a job. What is left is her marriage. Suddenly, she fell into the free market. Everybody said this corner is a free market. How can anyone come to a park to find a suitor? This is somehow like grabbing some pedestrian and getting married. You can’t bring it to the table! Every time I am so afraid to be recognized. Other people would say, ‘Isn’t your child excellent? How come she needs to come to the free market?’ ”

The free market of dating

Ironically, it is the parents who infuse the matchmaking corner with references to a labor market. Parents hung flyers that listed both their daughter’s accomplishments and requirements for an acceptable son-in-law. He must be at least a certain height, with a certain educational and income level. Some parents had a strong preference for those with Shanghai household registration, while others did not consider it crucial as long as the young ones were ‘excellent’ in terms of education, occupation, and income. Hypergamy is explicit: the young men are expected to be equivalent or better off than the women, although some parents could accept men younger than their daughter.

In terms of housing, it was common to see explicit expectations for the male suitor to provide the apartment for marriage. For many parents, providing it is an obligation of the young man and his family. The parents’ requirements for suitors reveal acceptance of the norms of hypergamy, yet such norms weave together male privileges and men’s great economic and social responsibilities in marriage. Chinese society is still a patriarchal one. The housing requirement rarely derived from parents’ inability to afford an apartment for their daughter but rather from their expectation that the man or his family needed to meet this basic standard of wealth. In fact, many of our interviewees had two apartments. For the parents of urban daughters, the ability of the young man to provide an apartment for the married couple was first a demonstration of his family’s financial standing.

Second, an apartment for the new nuclear family also meant that their daughter would not have to deal with the stressful in-law relationship under the same roof. Meanwhile, this expectation was tempered by parents’ recognition of soaring real estate prices in Shanghai in recent years. Many parents of daughters indicated that they would provide financial aid for the young couple to purchase an apartment before marriage because they considered it unlikely that the young couple could cope with the down payment and installments by themselves.

When asked about the need to meet certain physical and material conditions, some parents justified their requirements by pointing out that matchmaking naturally started with the match of tangible conditions in an environment full of strangers. Not to deny emotions or romantic feelings, parents frankly admitted that they were simply more practical than their daughters in mating choices.

Material expectations with new metrics

Careful examination reveals that, for their own mating, when they were young, these parents already had material expectations and requirements besides good personalities and class background. For example, they wanted to know if the person had an urban rather than rural household registration and if he or she worked in a famous state-owned unit in Shanghai. If the answer was yes, then a person and his or her family knew that after marriage, the couple would have a desirable working-class social status as well as stable income, a pension, and access to housing, medical care, and childcare. In sum, the couple and their parents did not use the same metric of material success as that of parents today, but marriage was still seen as a means to secure an advantageous societal position.

That said, the materialism implicit in parents’ discussion of mate choice does not mean that all parental concerns can be reduced to rational economic calculation. Rather, their focus on material success is intertwined with a strong sense of the parents’ responsibility to establish a good life for their daughters. Ms. Han’s words best illustrated this feeling on the part of parents: “This is something fundamental about being a human, to finish our historical mission. Do you understand? This is my duty. As a mother, I assume this is my duty.”

Repairing an imbalance they have created?

Because of this sense of responsibility, parents intervene in their daughter’s dating life when they see their daughter does not have time or social circles in which to find the right person. Thus, although Shanghai offers a rich nightlife, the young women in our interviews did not seem to take part in it, adopting a quieter lifestyle. Some mentioned that they often slept a lot on the weekend to make up for missed sleep during the busy and stressful work week. They also spent their free time reading books, surfing the Internet, and chatting with friends. Their workplaces did not seem to provide many opportunities for these young women to meet potential suitors. Furthermore, many young women worked in gen-

der-segregated environments. In some cases, parents' sense of responsibility seemed to be a consequence of feelings of guilt and regret. Parents, like teachers, often told students, and girls in particular, that while in school they should focus on studying and not date. Without identifying the people involved, Mr. Xiao criticized a person he knew who has imposed a "no dating during school time" policy, but then the mother had become frantic about finding her daughter a husband.

Hours of conversation with parents reveal a complicated picture of parental matchmaking practices in contemporary urban China that differs substantially from those of the late imperial era. First, parents are not imposing their decisions on their children. As parents emphasized, their role was just to screen the candidates and to seek choices that could be presented to their children who would decide to take the chance or not. Second, parents today do not primarily use a daughter's marriage to build a family network or maintain a household's social status. Instead, they are driven by their affectionate, emotional ties to their daughter and a deep sense of responsibility for their daughters' lives. Even among daughters we interviewed who resisted seeing "marriage" as a must, all acknowledged the sincere care offered by their parents.

However, the parents' sense of the volatility and insecurity of the outside world then shaped their requirements for their children's suitors and motivated parents to find a man who would be able to provide at least as good a life as her parents had. Many parents stated that they had tried to take good care of their beloved daughters in the first part of their lives, and they hoped that a similar or even better family environment could continue after marriage. Being responsible parents, therefore, meant choosing the proper person who

could provide their daughter with shelter from the outside world.

Happily, ever after... For whose sake?

The existence of parental matchmaking corners indicates the enduring significance of marriage in urban China and the powerful effects of a selective rendering of traditional gender ideology—"men leading the outer domain and women leading the inner domain"—on contemporary matchmaking expectations and strategies. Although it has been a time when educational opportunities and new middle-class jobs have made educated women more competitive with their male counterparts in the "outer domain."

Given the intense, intergenerational bonds created by the one-child policy and solidified by the economic insecurities of the reform era after 1978, it is not surprising either that parents remain anxious about their daughter's marital future nor that daughters are generally unwilling to openly rebuff their parents' matchmaking efforts. Not only has this generation of parents focused all their resources on the health and success of their only child, but their own support in old age is tied to their single child's success and happiness. Moreover, parents' endeavors cannot be interpreted simply as the imposition of patriarchal authority. Their anxiety and expectations are heartfelt, often out of genuine concern for their daughter's marital status. Such mutual understanding across the generations further supports the existence of matchmaking corners.

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