

PAST MATCHMAKING NORMS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON
CONTEMPORARY MARRIAGE MARKETS IN CHINA

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Introduction

Since 2004, marriage markets have been cropping up in various parks in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Shen Zhen and Wuhan. Marriage markets provide free platforms for parents to help their children find a suitable spouse. Parents who were born in the 1950s or 1960s are likely to be the vendors, and their goods are their unmarried children, usually born in the 1970s, 1980s or 1990s (Sun 2012a). Parents advertise by providing information regarding their unmarried children on colourful pieces of paper. The information may include age, height, job, income, education, family values or even a picture of their unmarried children (Winter 2014, Yang, 2011), and most also list the minimum requirements to ‘apply’ for their children, the most common criteria being financial situation, ownership of property, family values, age and educational level.

Parents meet collectively in a specific area that has come to be used as the usual spot, usually near long lines of noticeboards that already form part of the park. They then paste advertisements in the form of paper flyers on the noticeboards. Others prefer to staple their advertisements to trees in the meeting area. Some also display their advertisements around the area creatively by pasting their flyers on to umbrellas, park walls and even pavements. The space is not formally organized, but parents tend to collect at the area of greatest concentration. Amongst the chaotic, noisy and enthusiastic setting, with posters decorating the most visible spots, the parents are mostly stationed around their advertisements, ready to ‘serve’ the parents of prospective partners by asking or answering questions. The advertisements are not the only way parents seek out potential mates for their children: they also survey the marriage market to gauge it, assess their competitors or strike up conversations with other parents regarding their children. Some make use of notebooks to record details of the competition or potential partners. There are more advertisements for single women than for men (Hunt 2013), a reflection of the anxiety felt by parents of ‘left-over women’ (Fincher 2014, Sun 2012a).

This article will first tackle the literature addressing marriage markets in China before discussing the methodology involved. Following that, the article offers a brief overview of the contemporary reasons for which parents are involved in matchmaking, focusing particularly on

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marriage markets. Finally, based on past cultural practices, I argue that practices at marriage markets are facilitated by past matchmaking norms in China and offer examples of cultural practices to support my argument.

Marriage markets in contemporary China

According to Sun (2012a), modern marriage markets started in communities living in close proximity to parks. In many areas of China, the elderly tend to congregate collectively in parks close to their homes to engage in social activities. They practice Taichi and calligraphy, dance, exercise, sing, play mahjong, and more commonly just chat. These activities are conducted individually or in small groups and are encouraged by the state itself. This can be seen through the State Council's issuing of the 'Outline of Nationwide Physical Fitness Program' and the launch, in 1995, of campaigns propagating self-maintenance of one's health through physical fitness activities (Lashley 2013). Outdoor fitness facilities were subsequently installed in public parks and squares, especially around residential areas catering primarily to the elderly. In line with the aims of the program, public parks are free to the public or provided for a fee that is waived or reduced for retirees. Zhang (2009) argues that this helps the government show that they care for retirees, thus bolstering its image. She also claims that this socially contagious and low-cost movement aids the state in reducing overall health costs.

The elderly and middle-aged have thus developed into a community and generated social bonds, prompting conversations largely dedicated to home tips and remedies, health issues, reminiscing about the past, gossip and family affairs (Zhang *ibid.*). Among the latter the marital status of their children is a popular topic. Often the retirees will discuss or seek out potential partners for their children through introductions on the part of the friends they have made in the public park. This contained practice within their group eventually blossoms into the large-scale, self-organized marriage markets we see today, as more and more people, even those outside the park's social circle, become involved in exchanging contacts for their unmarried children. Shared by a common concern and purpose, this socially contagious exchange at a place they already frequent for morning routines has spread across China, with weekly or even daily sessions now being held (Winter 2014).

The practice of matchmaking in a marriage market is known as 白发相亲 (*baifaxiangqin*). The element 相亲 (*xiangqin*) can be defined as meeting or dating between two individuals (usually of the opposite sex) at the recommendation of someone else, such as parents, neighbours, co-workers or matchmakers, the goal being marriage (Zhou 2009). Dating in China is widely seen as a means of

finding a marital partner, thus seeking a more permanent arrangement rather than a casual social partner. While in a survey only 14% of American students shared this view, 42% of Chinese college students in mainland China aimed to find a marital partner through dating (Tang and Zuo 2000). Sun (2012b) explains that the element 白发 (*baifa*) in the phrase ‘白发相亲 (*baifaxiangqin*)’ refers to parents who wish to marry off their unmarried children. The phrase 白发相亲 (*baifaxiangqin*) can thus be simply defined as the practice of parents arranging their children’s marriages through marriage markets. This is a relatively new phenomenon, as the marriage market is still a fairly new form among China’s dating platforms. Parents use various methods and strategies to attempt to ‘sell’ their ‘commodities’. The entire transaction reflects the trading nature of such exchanges, where basic marketing skills are religiously employed. The positioning of posters, their informational layout, and good customer service and negotiation skills are all utilized. Some parents dress impeccably in visiting the market to project a ‘well-bred’ outlook and convince other parents of their family’s pedigree. Chinese parents regard family condition and parental behaviour and status as important determinants of the worth of their unmarried children (Sun 2012a).

According to Hunt (2013), children typically resist the choices made by their parents in marriage markets. In this bartering process, the children do not play any role in the searches, negotiations or discussions, all of which are usually conducted by the parents independently. The children are merely the ‘commodity’ that the parents are trying to barter over in the dynamics of this matchmaking practice, with little say or personal involvement. This has resulted in a high failure rate for marriages arranged in these marriage markets. While the poor selection pool, typically of male candidates, does affect the failure rate of this form of matchmaking, the children’s lack of involvement in or enthusiasm for what they consider a ‘shameful’ matchmaking practice contributes to this lack of success. Often, parents go behind their children’s back to participate in the event, even after being made aware of strong disapproval on the part of their children (Hunt *ibid.*).

Methodology

Participant observation was carried out with a group of parents in marriage markets around China. Through participation and observation of the parents’ routine activities, I established contact with a few frequent marriage market participants. Snowball sampling was used through interviewees who had been accessed through initial contacts to increase sample diversity (cf. Creswell 2013). Individual interviews in the form of informal conversations with Chinese parents who participated in marriage markets in Wuhan, Shanghai and Beijing were used to assess the contemporary reasons

for attending the marriage markets and to ask parents whether they felt that past cultural norms had affected this form of matchmaking. The informal nature of the interviews was especially important for examining such delicate questions, as parents may change or omit certain information from their answers to show themselves in a good light, especially in the sensitive areas of family and marriage. The interviewees were selected at random, and thirty participants were interviewed, only ten of whom were male. This is representative of the gender imbalance at marriage markets, which are dominated by women. Interviewees were aged between 48 to 76. The interviews mostly took place at the marriage market, but some were conducted at cafés nearby. Interviews were recorded and transcribed before being coded to find a common cultural norm that could explain matchmaking behaviour at such marriage markets.

An analysis of the contents of multiple state media and international news reports, editorials and images on the Internet on this issue was also carried out, as well as an analysis of official statistics. Besides official data, other sources of data obtained from forums were also examined. However, the article primarily focuses on the issue from the parents' and on in-depth discussions pertaining to Chinese parents' attitudes regarding marriage markets and past norms of matchmaking.

Contemporary motives for attendance at marriage markets

Why do parents continue to attend marriage markets despite their low success rates? One interviewee explained, 'As an adult with more experience, I know how to differentiate between the "good fruit" and the "bad fruit". What does my daughter know? She will appreciate me when I am successful and find her a good man'. Another interviewee said, 'I know my son doesn't approve, but I can't just sit back and do nothing. He is too quiet, he doesn't talk to girls, it's hard for him to find a girlfriend. I really want grandchildren.'

Most of the interviewees responded similarly. They viewed themselves as more adult than their children. They also indicated that they know what is best for their children and that they strive hard to influence or try to be involved in their children's love lives and personal lives. Even though the market does not always bear fruit, the interviews indicated that parents feel as if 'they are doing something' and that 'they feel like they are part of a group of people with the same problems', while others indicate their desperation on the matter. One of the interviewees reflected this anxiety and said, 'I've tried everything! Matchmaking agencies, newspaper advertisements, paid subscriptions to dating sites, and now this! The government is not helping us to help find partners for our children, so we have to resort to such drastic measures.'

Further investigation, however, showed that marriage markets are not used exclusively for the purpose of finding mates for their single children. Twenty-five of the thirty selected interviewees responded that they use many other methods in addition to marriage markets, such as various paid services, advertising platforms, dating sites and professional matchmaking agencies or ‘love hunters’ (Tober 1984). However, the zero to low cost of marriage markets continues to attract parents, despite the high failure rate.

Why would parents meddle in the marital affairs of their children, let alone go so far as to participate in marriage markets, often behind the backs of their children? What makes this practice acceptable and imaginable to parents? The article will next discuss the accumulation of past cultural practices of matchmaking, in the form of cultural templates and precedents, that helps make this form of matchmaking seem sensible to parents in China today.

Mediation and introduction in traditional Chinese relationships

What makes the idea of marriage markets acceptable? One respondent said, ‘Why is this acceptable to me? Why isn’t it? The Chinese have always relied on introductions for matchmaking, even in the past. Marriage markets are all about introductions – for free.’ Another respondent answered similarly: ‘It is part of Chinese culture to look for introductions by parents with similar needs, like matchmakers in the old days.’

Matchmaking based on introductions by one’s peers is therefore nothing new in Chinese matchmaking culture. Parents in marriage markets rely on other parents or relatives to introduce their own child or younger relative as a potential candidate. This accumulated practice is not without a historical basis. Culturally, we can find similarities in Chinese history that date back thousands of years (Buxbaum 1978, Szto 2011). The idea of marrying an individual whose acquaintance one’s unmarried child would otherwise not make unless they are introduced by an older stranger or parent has long been prevalent in Chinese culture. Traditionally, children were taught from youth that an intimate relationship should be based on the etiquette of a formal introduction. Such procedures are conventionally performed by matchmakers (Xia and Zhou 2003).

Mencius’s words about matchmaking reflect the ideals of his period:

丈夫生而愿为之有室，女子生而愿为之有家；父母之心人皆有之。不待父母之命、媒妁之言，钻穴隙相窥，踰墙相从，则父母、国人皆贱之。古之人未尝不欲仕也，又恶不由其道；不由其道而往者，与鑽穴隙之类也。

When a couple has a son, they want a wife for him; or when they have a daughter, they want a husband for her. All people have this parental feeling. But if, without waiting for a parent's command and a matchmaker's word, [the young people] were to bore holes to catch a glimpse of each other or climb over fences to be together, then their parents and compatriots would all despise them. The ancients rarely failed to want to serve in office, but hated to do so by means of an inappropriate path. Proceeding by an inappropriate path would be like boring holes.

Mencius's words draw attention to the importance of 'introductions' in making matrimonial arrangements. Jordan (1999) argued that Mencius made this statement to teach his listeners that pursuing public office directly should be condemned just as decent people condemn young people who engage in romantic liaisons without proper marital arrangements and the approval of matchmakers and parents. The nature of the statement indicates that the process of matchmaking was evident to both Mencius and his listeners. It also shows that the repertoire of matchmaking is linked to parental consent, the cultural practice whereby parents use their approval or acceptance of a young couple's union as a direct tool facilitating a matchmaking event. This will be discussed next in the article.

The phrase 'a parent's command and a matchmaker's word' (父母之命媒妁之言) from Mencius's statement underlies the marriage culture in China in the past. This phrase later evolved into a proverb used even by modern Chinese today (Chao 2014, Sheng 2004, Jordan 1999) to signify acceptance of the role of matchmaker in Chinese marriage culture. As Chen (1936) points out, the role of matchmaker was acknowledged as legal in Tang times. Indeed, the law stipulated that without a matchmaker the marriage would not be legal (Zhang 2011). We also find matchmakers in the Ming and Qing periods. Under Republican legislature as well, the 'introducer' is required to draw up documents pertaining to the legalization of a marriage (Jordan *ibid.*).

Also, under the influence of Confucianism, formal marriage ceremonies called Liu Li ('the six rites of matrimony') were developed. These included a stipulation that the family of an unmarried son must send a matchmaker to the unmarried daughter's family to express their desire for marriage (Lu 2008, Luo 2007, Ma 1981, Xu 2011). The Six Rites, though often simplified into three, are found even in the Song period (Bernhardt 1999, Chiu 1958). Spouses were often unaware of each other's physical appearance until the wedding ceremony and had no say over the final selection. In most cases, unmarried children were excluded from the selection process (Sheng 2004). Matchmakers, mediators and introducers evidently occupy a strong cultural position in the history of marriage in China.

However, Confucian values were criticized by the May 4th Movement of 1919 (Lang 1946, Levy 1949). This is reflected in an article Mao Tse-Dong wrote condemning Confucian values, citing the example of a young woman who had committed suicide due to the pressure of a traditionally arranged marriage (Pridmore and Walter 2013, Xu and Whyte 1990, Witke 1967). This simultaneously brought the traditional role of matchmakers into question. The Communist Party, which came into power in China in 1949, advocated greater freedom of marital choice, which further drove out the figure of the matchmakers. Coupled with propaganda efforts, cultural reform and Westernization, the idea that marrying for 'love' is the 'right' way to get married became increasingly accepted among young people in China (Levy *ibid.*, Meijer 1971, Yang 1959). While this transition has significantly increased love marriages, public discourse shows that repertoires of matchmaking still include resort to 'introducers', a remnant of the ancient cultural practice of utilizing matchmakers.

According to Xu and Whyte (1990), data from a probability sample of 586 women who were or had been married in Chengdu, Sichuan, in the People's Republic of China, which was used to examine the transition from arranged to free-choice marriages in that city, revealed that approximately twenty percent of marriages that depended on mediation were arranged by parents or senior relatives. It can therefore be concluded that, although freedom of mate choice is legally available and mandated, the transition to it from arranged marriages is incomplete. Compared to the West, marital freedom is not exercised as much in modern China despite the increasing Western influence (Parish and Whyte 1980). Given this incomplete transition, reliance on intermediaries and introductions prevails. Expectedly, 12.5 percent of couples from Shanghai were previously neighbours or had been introduced by relatives, while Gansu returned a much higher percentage of 45.3 per cent (Xu 1997). The most frequent practice of matchmaking is still by arrangement (Tober 1984). When young people are unable to find a mate on their own, either at school or at work, their relatives, friends, colleagues and professional match-makers will be mobilized to fill the role of 'matchmaker' (Tober *ibid.*, Xia and Zhou 2003). These arrangements are usually made by two separate introducers who already know each other. These 'friends' will introduce their own acquaintances or relatives, who would otherwise not get to know each other. The introducers also act as mediators and provide information and pictures about the potential match. If this possibility does not come to fruition, the searching will continue (Xia and Zhou *ibid.*). This method is more commonly used when kinship ties are strong. Moreover, there are still instances where the parents from both sides will discuss the particulars without involving their children, the matches often being announced after the details have been worked out (Tober *ibid.*). Interestingly, this is the precise method that is used by parents in marriage markets. It is not hard to see how this particular outlet

and the practice of *baifaxiangqin* are imaginable to parents in China, especially when they already indulge in practices like this even without the help of such markets.

However, why would parents attend marriage markets to act in this way? One respondent said, ‘Most of us have already exhausted the contacts we know. It is nice to come to the marriage market, where there are many other parents with whom we are not acquainted. This way, we can fish out potential new mates, and there is a greater range to choose from.’

This reflects the sense of security for parents when they act in this fashion, as their peers are able to vouch personally for the potential mate’s family conditions and parents. Some parents tend to pass on their cases out of good will when they know that the match is more suitable for their acquaintances in the marriage market. Matching a good marriage is culturally perceived as helping to accumulate good fortune for oneself and one’s child (Jordan 1999, Lu 2008). With past culture having such an influence on current matchmaking practices, modern Chinese parents are adapting them to current times and challenges.

Decision-making by parents

Queen and Habenstein (1974) pointed out that marriage is a social contract between two families, and thus the marriages of children are not regarded as matters for the individual. The magnitude of the importance of such decisions is given as the reason why it should be the parents who influence the outcome (Lu 2008). This puts a new perspective into the saying, ‘Parents know best’, as strong parental control is culturally part of marriage traditions in many Asian cultures, including China’s (Salaff 1973).

This is reflected in one of the responses I collected. The interviewee said, ‘Even though it is not as strict as in the old days, parental approval is still very important today. The last boyfriend my daughter brought home, I did not approve of him, he had no stable job. My daughter broke up with him. It is simply Chinese culture for the parents from both sides to approve of a marriage in order for the children to marry with full blessings.’

‘The Story of Yingying’, written during the Zhenyuan period, illustrates the discourse on romance and social propriety which involves approval of the arrangements by guardians or parents in the Tang period. The story revolves around a young scholar called Zhang and a maiden called Cui Yingying. One of the moral lessons championed in the story was that a man should not commit the social delict of being physically and romantically involved with a woman without the involvement of parental arrangement and choice. Deviating from propriety and succumbing to romance was frowned upon. Liu explanation (1962) for the Chinese attitude towards love is in line with the discourse found in this ‘moral fable’ – be sensible and realistic. He also showed that the

theme of love is ‘seldom, if ever, platonic’ in Chinese poetry. Marriage was still primarily a family and parental affair. Tales from the Tang period echo this motif.

Owen (1986) argued that, in the context of Confucian public values of the period, the moral lesson of the fable was justified. Romance was seen to be less important and should be foregone when propriety dictates that a union must have formal parental blessing (Luo 2005). While there is greater emphasis on ‘romance’ and ‘love’ in relationships in contemporary China, Xu and Whyte’s analysis (1990) of the Chengdu Marriage Quality Score showed that respondents regarded the relationship with husband’s kin and that between the respective parents as important factors making for a happy marriage. Even in modern China, the family’s approval of the spouse is perceived to affect the quality of the marriage itself as well. All of these criteria are commonly found listed in the posters hung up around marriage markets. However, the prerequisite for a successful match in these marriage markets is approval of the potential mate’s parents, since it is the parents who are the agents facilitating the matches. This is the distinguishing aspect of marriage markets and *baifaxiangqin*, the matchmaking culture where parents are primarily involved in mate selection. Parents may even persuade their children to marry a pre-approved mate choice, especially when they are uncertain of their children’s own plans and decision-making (Lu 2008).

Thirty-three per cent of respondents in urban areas made marriage decisions ‘by myself with my parents’ permission’, and 58.86 per cent of urban respondents answered that decisions were made by their parents but with their permission. Marriages are therefore sometimes arranged by the parents but with their children’s consent (Sheng 2004). The culture of picking a mate based on parental approval is still inherent in modern China’s practices of matchmaking (Zhang 2011). Marriage markets are a testament to the amount of influence parents still have on the marital affairs of their children. In other words, marriage markets do not just showcase, they also cement the role of parents in partner selection, a surprisingly archaic traditional role.

One respondent explained, ‘With marriage markets, parents have the ability to screen potential spouses before introducing them to their children. This way, the potential spouse will already have my approval even before my daughter gets to consider him. It is easier than having to decide whether or not I approve of a stranger who she has already fallen in love with.’

‘Parents’ Meet-up’ involving the parents from both sides still signifies something significant today. It indicates that the relationship is mature and ready for marriage. Han (2012) discusses the implications of not having the approval of both sides of the family: arguments may break out and may cause disharmony within the family and the relationship. With marriage markets, this aspect is satisfied from the start to avoid changes that fail to obtain parental approval.

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The influence of this norm is reflected in the response of another of the interviewees, who said, 'I like marriage markets because we get to interact with the parents directly. The parents are equally important in a union, as we will be family after the union of our children. If the mother is shabby or not cultured, surely their child will not be much better. If the parents dress well and pronounce Mandarin properly, their child should be more refined and suited to my son.' Sometimes, therefore, parental approval also extends to the parents of their child's partner.

Conclusion

The combination of popular, inherent cultural practices which have been passed down for centuries in China is still ingrained in the older Chinese generation. The archaic matchmaking cultures of parents actively seeking and relying on introductions as a legitimate source of matchmaking, combined with the tradition whereby parents decide their children's partners, have made marriage markets and *baifaxiangqin* very accessible to the parents who participate in them. The influence of past matchmaking norms has helped shape *baifaxiangqin*, where the convenient combination of pre-parental approval and introductions is put into practice. This could explain why marriage markets and the practice of *baifaxiangqin* are acceptable, accessible and imaginable to parents in China today. With the accumulation of two very traditional cultural templates and precedents for matchmaking, it is understandable how this form of matchmaking still seems sensible to China's older generation.

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