

MATE SELECTION IN CHINA

Causes and Consequences in the Search for a Spouse



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Foreword

This project began from the observations that the three of us had made while spending time in China. The past several decades have been witnessed to dramatic transformations within the nation, as its pace of modernization has continued to accelerate. A casual stroll through Shanghai, with its futuristic skyline of Pudong, allowed us to see young couples, walking together, taking selfies, and doing most of the things which young people in love do. However, we noticed that only a scant few of the couples would hold hands in public, and even fewer dared to perform the scandalous act of kissing in public (gasp!). The peculiarity of intimate relationships, through our Western eyes, was fascinating and prompted us to delve deeper into the subject. Subsequent visits to rural areas in central and western China revealed a dramatically different approach to intimate relationships, as young people there typically deferred to the wishes of their parents, who could both initiate and stop such relationships with a simple directive to their daughters and sons. Indeed, in many areas of the country, the norms and practices concerning intimate relationships among young people were more reflective of the traditions dating back thousands of years. Finding a partner in contemporary China, then, represents a challenge to many young women and men, as they live in a society that is not only modernizing and evolving but also built upon a long-standing culture whose traditions are still held sacred by many in the larger society.

As is typically the case, the younger generation tends to be more progressive than their predecessors. This is most certainly true in China, where adolescents and young adults are constantly pushing the normative boundaries of traditional culture. Many of the signs of such progressive natures are readily visible in the young people, themselves. Their preferences for clothing, music, and hairstyles are quite similar to those of their counterparts in other modernized countries. Young men with visible tattoos and young women with blonde hair would have drawn considerable condemnation in the previous generation but are now regarded as normative, at least among young people. Obviously, with internet access and greater exposure to the worlds of young people outside of China, adolescents and young adults in China can readily assess what they deem to be popular, and then adjust their appearance, accordingly. In the realm of intimate relationships, though, young people have few, if any, reliable sources of information. Contemporary youth cannot easily ask their parents how to ask someone out on a date and, more importantly, how to go about holding hands, kissing, or having sexual intercourse. Not only would such conversations be incredibly awkward for both the young people and their parents, but there is also a substantial likelihood that

the parents literally had no experience when they were young, themselves! This is what makes mate selection in contemporary China so intriguing, as the younger generation is, to a great extent, creating their own contexts, standards, and norms for intimate relationships. It is an evolving landscape being painted by the very actors who live within it.

Adolescents in China are not different from their counterparts around the globe and often desire a boyfriend or girlfriend. However, their teachers and school administrators will actively prohibit such relationships (at least on the school grounds). Among many young people, then, a “relationship” may involve merely walking to and from school, together. College students, who often revel in the newfound freedoms they have, now removed from their parents’ mindful eyes, want to have relationships, as well, but often simply do not have any clear notions as to how to go about doing so. Frequently, their “relationships” are largely comprised of sharing their thoughts and feelings over WeChat or other cellphone apps. These sorts of approaches to intimate relationships may seem quaint, and even a bit naïve, to many observers. At the same time, though, many young people also want to engage in sexual intercourse, which would seemingly require building a love relationship with a partner over an extended period of time. Once, again, young people in China are forging their own paths concerning intimacy. Many college students, for example, will again turn to online websites and cellphone apps, searching not for a love partner but merely a sex partner. The physical act of sexual intercourse is often regarded in a more pragmatic manner by many young people, who do not always associate love with sex.

As we began to consider the various approaches to love and romance among young people in China, we also became increasingly aware of the evolving context of love and romance. The nation has, of course, undergone tremendous economic advancement over the past several decades. As a consequence, there is a growing middle-class population whose preferences for larger homes, cars, and comfortable lifestyles are reflective of the increasing materialism in the society. Change in one social institution typically impacts every other social institution, and this is most certainly the case in China. The very notion of dating, spending time together, apart from others, for the purpose of sharing some leisurely activity, has become swept up in the culture shift toward materialism. Young couples now need to have meals in nice (and, typically, expensive) restaurants. Gifts, such as flowers, candy, and jewelry, have become almost essential elements within dating relationships. These materialistic shifts, though, are not only occurring in the real world but also in the virtual realm. Contemporary young women and men go to great lengths to photograph themselves having fun, being in love, and embodying the very essence of romance, and then share the images online. Once they post images online, young couples eagerly await the comments of their friends, who will typically give “likes” and positive affirmations concerning the love shared by the young couple. Such behaviors have a cyclical pattern, wherein the more others believe a young couple to be in love, the more the young couple feels compelled to validate those beliefs by sharing even more images. Of course, the irony is that most of the photos are staged and do not necessarily represent the real nature of the young couple’s relationship.

Mate selection in China is made even more complicated by the characteristics of the youth population. Specifically, the skewed sex ratio, resulting from the family planning policies instituted decades earlier (which, in turn, became associated with selective abortion and female infanticide), has created an environment wherein there are millions more young males than young females. The demographics of mate selection are not lost upon young people, themselves, as many young men openly express their distress, realizing that the odds of finding a spouse are not in their favor. Many young women, on the other hand, are well aware of the fact that they have, in effect, become a scarce commodity. In conjunction with the increasing rates of female college degree attainment, there is an empowerment among women, as they feel that they have control over their life trajectories. In the context of a culture, which has been fiercely patriarchal for thousands of years, the elevation of women's status, and particularly their desire for control over matters concerning intimate relationships and fertility, is nothing short of astounding. Despite this, many young women (especially those who are well educated and successful in their careers) continue to deal with the stigmatization of their single, unmarried status. The label of “shengnü” continues to be applied, even today, yet their prospects for finding a suitable spouse (equally well educated, and preferably with egalitarian attitudes) are slim.

Understandably, an exclusive focus on love and romance would completely overlook both the complexity and outcomes of mate selection in contemporary China. Like many advanced nations, China's population is rapidly aging. The expansion of the elderly population is creating a greater need for support, which, traditionally, has come from adult children and their spouses. With a decrease in the marriage rate, the needs of the elderly are rapidly becoming a huge societal dilemma. The demand for wives has not gone unnoticed by criminals, as human trafficking, kidnapping, and prostitution have all increased over recent years. Along its southern borders, in particular, human trafficking has become a tremendous problem. Problems such as the needs of the aging population and the increases in various crimes are all directly related to mate selection, and these problems are not going to simply go away.

Simply put, we wanted to obtain a better understanding of this evolving landscape of dating and mate selection. Rather than focusing simply upon one dimension, we hoped to thoroughly consider both the causes and the consequences, therein. While some dimensions were quite pleasant to examine, such as young people's notions of love and romance, other dimensions, such as human trafficking, were decidedly distasteful. Nonetheless, in order to fully comprehend the nature of mate selection in China, today, we needed to provide as complete a picture as possible. Although we provide a variety of data, throughout the following chapters, we also include survey data and interviews that we collected, along the way. Our samples are comprised of college students, drawn from a variety of urban universities, from across several different provinces, and were collected from 2015 through 2019. We were pleasantly surprised to discover that the overwhelming majority welcomed the opportunity to discuss matters pertaining to dating and mate selection, particularly as these were topics that they largely never discussed with their parents! We wish to extend our most sincere thanks to all of

those who participated, along with our hopes that their relationship aspirations are fulfilled. Special thanks are given to our sociology colleagues in China and to Zhuzhu Cheng, Yiren Yang, and Shi Dong (Lesley), all of whom were very helpful in the collection of data. Extra special thanks go to Sha Luo, who not only assisted in the collection of data but also whose loveliness graces the cover of this book. Finally, we wish to extend our most heartfelt appreciation to our respective families, without whose love, support, and patience, this project would not have been possible. 谢谢大家 (Xièxiè dàjiā)!...

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