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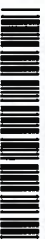
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Wives, Husbands, and Lovers

**MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY IN HONG KONG,
TAIWAN, AND URBAN CHINA**

Edited by Deborah S. Davis and Sara L. Friedman

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5 WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO GET MARRIED?

Parental Matchmaking and Middle-Class Women
in Contemporary Urban China

Jun Zhang and Peidong Sun

There are only a limited number of good young men. For my daughter's marriage, I struggled over whether I should come [to the Shanghai matchmaking corner] and seek my luck. As for young Shanghai men, the older good ones are difficult to find, and the rest is a mingling of good and bad who might actually trap you. Personally, I really don't want to come. But if I don't come, my daughter's marriage problem still has not been solved by now!

—Ms. Ho, a mother with a thirty-one-year-old graphic designer single daughter¹

I am really touched that parents came [to the Shanghai matchmaking corner] so early in the morning to interact with strangers on their children's behalf. . . . Even without a boyfriend, you can still enjoy life on the weekends. You can spend time with your parents, try good food, do some shopping, meet with friends, or do some reading. There are all sorts of things to do. Why would you put matchmaking in the first place, prioritized in your life? Totally unnecessary!

—Jessica, a twenty-eight-year-old single career woman

THREE DECADES AFTER THE LAUNCH OF MARKET REFORMS, Shanghai is a leading exemplar 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. This "matchmaking corner" (相亲角) seems a jarring revival of "tradition" in China's most cosmopolitan city. Moreover, it is a practice that some college-educated daughters with good jobs, like Jessica quoted above, find totally unnecessary. However, when one listens to parents such as Mrs. Ho, their matchmaking efforts seem to be a rational response to the many uncertainties faced by parents in late middle age. Not only have market reforms created

new uncertainties about this generation's own economic and social position, but they also have created new anxieties about the future happiness and security of their children, especially college-educated daughters who have delayed marriage beyond their late twenties and thus have fallen into the stigmatized category of surplus women or *shengnü* (剩女). Nor are these parental matchmaking corners, driven by high levels of anxiety among middle-aged and elderly urbanites about the futures of their children and themselves, limited to fast-paced, competitive Shanghai. They also exist in other big cities, such as Beijing and Shenzhen, and thus provide more general insights into how radical economic and social transformations have broadly affected expectations of marriage across different generations.

This chapter explores new expectations of marriage from the parents' perspectives, revealing parental concerns, anxieties, and frustrations about the marriage market in a changing urban environment.² Some of our evidence comes from secondary sources and census figures, but most comes from hundreds of hours of fieldwork in the matchmaking corner of Shanghai's People's Park from September 2007 through June 2008, with follow-up interviews conducted in 2009. Through extended and sometimes repeated conversations, we built trust with parents and directly witnessed the dynamic process of matchmaking.

Some scholars have seen intense parental investment in their children's marriage as a revival of traditional practices. However, our fieldwork reveals that parental matchmaking is less a residue or revival of traditional practices and more a response to contemporary demographic and economic pressures and to the parents' strong connections to the socialist past, albeit rearticulated through the language of market. To assume continuity of traditional marriage practices distorts our understanding of contemporary urban China in several ways. First, it discounts the experiences of a generation whose life courses have been defined by decades of socialist revolution. Second, it neglects the connection between social structure and cultural practices. Scholars have demonstrated that marriage practices and internal dynamics within the couple and the family are shaped by both specific social contexts and larger historical processes in China (see, for example, Davis and Harrell 1993; Friedman 2006; Whyte 2005; Whyte and Parish 1984; Yan 2003). A focus on parental matchmaking therefore enables us to explore how marriage practices have been influenced by such forces as the intense intergenerational ties created by

the one-child policy, the uncertainties of market-oriented economic reforms, ongoing contestation over gender paradigms, and the ideological legacies of a socialist and revolutionary past.

We begin by examining the crucial socioeconomic and demographic contexts for the marriage pressures confronted by urban daughters (see also Chapters 1 and 4). Specifically, we highlight how norms of hypergamy for brides create tensions for single daughters that are exacerbated by high expectations of educational and professional success. We then contextualize the marriage pressure on urban daughters in relation to the discursive field of "surplus women" that emerged out of contestations over gender roles shaped by the diverse political movements and economic forces of China's tumultuous twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. After exploring the institutional, social, and cultural contexts of parental matchmaking, we use our ethnography to illustrate how different life experiences have influenced parental perceptions of the matchmaking corner and have fashioned their choices and expectations regarding marriage and family.

UNMARRIED URBAN DAUGHTERS AND THE EMERGING MIDDLE CLASS

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.³ 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 pieces of paper and then clip them to pieces of string tied between the trees, place them on bushes, or lay them on the ground. They 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 matchmaker zone" (业余红娘区) 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 predominantly 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 recommendation for men. No over-aged women." 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\$13 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 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 (Li 2004). However, for parents of single women, a daughter's entry into the middle class can create new anxieties.⁴

During the Maoist period, status and income differentials between different jobs and between men and women were relatively small, and although marriage did involve "matching gates" (门当户对), the expectations of an urban woman's parents were not that different from those of a man (Davis 2000). Moreover, the ideological emphasis on the leading role of the urban proletariat suppressed preferences for professionals and made employment in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) a distinct advantage for men (Whyte and Parish 1984). In addition, because most urban work units provided relatively comprehensive and reliable social benefits to all employees regardless of occupation, the material consequences of marrying a man of any particular job status were muted.

Over the successive waves of economic reforms since 1980, the occupational hierarchy has shifted dramatically in both ideological and structural

terms (Davis and Wang 2009; Naughton 2007). Many intellectuals and state officials “plunged into the sea” (下海) and became entrepreneurs in the private sector. While many state-owned enterprises confronted with hardship and bankruptcy laid off large number of employees, privately owned factories actively recruited rural migrants and turned China into the “world’s factory.” The status of workers, who were associated with either SOE layoffs or rural migrants, plunged vis-à-vis white-collar employees and professionals. Simultaneously, the revival of commerce and trade and the arrival of transnational companies created job opportunities for lawyers, accountants, and managers that required higher education (Hoffman 2010). Reform did not mean that no state jobs were desirable. In fact, with the government reforms promoted by the late leader Deng Xiaoping (Shambaugh 2000), civil servant posts became highly prized among college graduates because of their stability and social benefits.

Not required to fight for resources with brothers as a result of the one-child policy implemented since the late 1970s, urban daughters have become the center of family investment (Fong 2002); as the number of spots in college grew rapidly, women’s rates of enrollment rose faster than those of their male peers.⁵ Furthermore, because the expanded educational opportunities among urban daughters coincided with the expansion of white-collar and professional jobs, the generation born after 1980 has had relatively easy access to China’s new middle class. But contemporary norms of hypergamy still require that women marry men who are older than they and who boast equal or superior educational and occupational status.⁶ As a result, the increased gap between blue-collar and white-collar wages and the success of women in both university exams and the professional job market have created a situation in which college-educated women who have not married by their late twenties are perceived as having limited opportunity to marry. These women are called “surplus women” in the media. And for parents of only daughters, the educational and professional success they so intently advocated for their daughters now has become a source of great anxiety.

Despite the norm of hypergamy, women should have a demographic advantage in the marriage market. Nationwide, the sex ratio of boys to girls at birth has increased steadily from the “natural” rate of 106:100 in the late 1970s to 120:100 in 2004. Although census data is not irrefutable (Zhai and Yang 2009), it is widely accepted that by 2009 men outnumbered women in every cohort under the age of thirty. Even in Shanghai, where sex ratios are not as

Table 5.1. The never-married population with college education and above, divided by age group according to the 2000 Shanghai Census.

Age group	Total number		Never-married men		Never-married women	
	Men	Women	Number	As percentage of the total number of men	Number	As percentage of the total number of women
25–29	7136	4883	4310	60%	1898	39%
30–34	5656	3600	1113	20%	412	11%
35–39	5117	2401	357	7%	103	4%
40–44	2764	1033	112	4%	28	3%
45–49	2590	1095	49	2%	34	3%
50 and over	5526	5889	152	1%	138	2%

SOURCE: Shanghai Population Census Office (上海人口普查办公室). “Shanghai 2000 Population Census Assembly” (上海市2000人口普查统计资料汇编). Retrieved on April 28, 2010, from http://chinadataonline.org/member/census2000/ybtableview_c.asp?ID=3885.

distorted as in rural areas, it is men, not women, who are more likely never to marry in every age group, including among those with a college degree (see Table 5.1).

To summarize, census data depict a reality that differs both from the “surplus women” discourse and from parents’ perceptions that there are more excellent women than men. The question, therefore, is not whether these parents are correct that there are surplus women, but *why* parents feel so anxious and what their anxiety reveals about broader concerns regarding the institution of marriage in China’s major cities. Research repeatedly has shown that urbanization and industrialization raise the average age at first marriage, but as Cai and Wang explained in Chapter 4, in Shanghai it is only very recently that these macrosocietal changes rather than explicit state interventions have driven marriage ages upward in the same direction as other societies (Goode 1963; Raymo 1998; Retherford, Ogawa and Matsukura 2001; United Nations 2008). In addition, in China men and women from both the generation of the parents in the marriage corner and that of their unmarried children have been deeply affected by China’s unique one-child policy. In most cases, the parents represent the first generation of urban residents limited to a single child and their children the first generation of singletons.

In response to the one-child policy, the parents of daughters and sons have channeled substantial energy into providing unprecedented opportunities for their only child to develop careers and lifestyles that are compatible with

their educational and economic status. Part of this parental strategy includes encouraging daughters to delay finding a boyfriend until they are at least securely established in university. Thus, although as Farrer observed (Chapter 3), there is an emerging culture among urban, educated youth in which extensive dating relationships are separated from marriage, many daughters in our study did not have much dating experience when they were in school. Meanwhile, in an era when monogamy and heterosexuality confront multiple challenges, finding “Mr. Right” and establishing a stable marriage require more than a simple match of age, education, and occupation. It is in this social context that the discourse of “surplus women” and parental anxieties about their daughter’s marriage prospects flourish in Chinese cities.

SHENGNÜ: CHANGING GENDER PARADIGMS

“*Shengnü*” (剩女) means literally “surplus women” in Chinese. It is a play on the homonym “*shengnü*” (圣女), or “saintly women.” To understand the discourse of “surplus women,” we trace the changing ideological and practical relationships among women’s roles, family, and the state. These relationships have created the context in which marriage and parental matchmaking practices take on new meaning and significance in the reform era.⁷

We do not know exactly when *shengnü* first entered popular discourse, but by 2007 the term had appeared among the 171 new words highlighted in “The Chinese Language Life Report” published jointly by the Ministry of Education and the National Language Committee (ZYSZBK 2007). Pervasive as the term has become, *shengnü* is by no means clearly defined. But one widely circulating definition found on the search engine *Baidu* matches the understandings of those we met at the Shanghai matchmaking corner: *shengnü* are “young women born in the 1970s, who are also known as the ‘3S’—Single, Seventies, and Stuck.” “Seventies” refers to the decade of their birth, meaning that they were between the ages of 30 and 40 in 2010. In many newspaper discussions, however, the age threshold drops to 27 or 28 (Liang 2006; Liu 2008). An often-quoted online chart, entitled the “Ranking of Surplus Men and Women” (剩男剩女等级表), distinguishes four different levels of surplus women by age: twenty-five to twenty-seven, twenty-eight to thirty-one, thirty-two to thirty-six, and thirty-seven and older. By inference, we conclude that the late twenties represent the threshold of becoming a *shengnü*.⁸

Although the issue of age is ambiguous, the marital status and socioeconomic status of surplus women are relatively clear cut. Newspapers and online

discussions often describe them as “well-educated, well-paid, smart women.” In general the defining features are single, urban, young, well-educated women with stable jobs that bring in a decent income, all of which are common features among the daughters of those looking for suitors in Shanghai’s matchmaking corner.

Clearly the term *surplus women* is not a neutral description of a demographic phenomenon. Although the term *surplus men* coexists with *surplus women*, the latter appears much more frequently in everyday usage. In the already-mentioned “2006 Chinese Language Life Report,” there was not even an entry for “surplus men.” Most important, in the marriage market urban single men are identified positively as “golden bachelors” (黄金单身汉) or “diamond single men” (钻石王老五). Derogatory terms for single men do exist, but as in Hong Kong they are explicitly class coded and clearly distinguish desirable urban, middle-class, single men from their counterparts with lower socioeconomic status (see Ho’s discussion of the derogatory term *lou* in Chapter 7). By contrast, terms for single women, such as *old maid* (老姑娘), are used across the social strata, and the terms *surplus women* and *failed dog* (败犬) are reserved for urban, middle-class, single women.⁹ The derogatory nature of these distinctively gendered terms does not derive from concerns that uncompromising single women are exacerbating the marriage squeeze faced by men. Instead, the terms underscore how single women threaten conventional assumptions that success as a wife trumps success in the workplace and that remaining single is abnormal and represents failure as a woman (Jin 2009).

A reporter from the *Chinese Women’s Post*, the newspaper published by the All-China Women’s Federation, openly critiques these normative gender expectations regarding marriage:

The word *surplus* indicates anxiety with respect to heterosexual marriage: Regardless of whether one is male or female, one should marry someone of the opposite sex by the publicly acknowledged age, or her or his personal life is questionable. Furthermore, the existence of these people and their growth in number also constitute a social problem. . . . The derogatory term *surplus women* is necessary to show them that, no matter how successful they are in educational and career accomplishments, they are nothing if they do not obtain the favor of men. (Lü 2009)

Lü’s critique highlights a significant shift in prevailing gender ideology in the aftermath of the widespread rejection of the socialist blueprint and the

rapid commodification of contemporary urban life. As they enthusiastically embrace markets and career success, young urban women also espouse new definitions of femininity that reject both traditional visions of unequal gender difference and the homogenizing models of the socialist era that collapsed distinctions between men and women (Evans 1997; Honig and Hershatter 1988; Wu 2009). As Lü's critique makes abundantly clear, however, finding a middle path between these two extremes is by no means an easy task for educated urban women today.

In contrast to the socialist model of a masculinized woman, the image of women in reform-era China has become softer and gentler in terms of both the female body and womanly virtues. One also observes a return of the discourse of "virtuous wives and good mothers" (贤妻良母), whose duties are to "take care of the husband and teach the children" at home (相夫教子), discourses that were largely rejected during the Maoist era. Such an attitude is illustrated by the 2008 article "On Family Harmony" in the leading official newspaper *The People's Daily*:

Wives should learn to shift the focus of life from the self to the family, actively and consciously overcoming the weakness in their personalities. Look after and be considerate of the husband, and respect elders. Take more care of the family and manage the family. Continuously increase the solidarity and attractiveness of the family so that the husband could release his work pressure in the thoughtful and caring familial love, and enjoy the company of the family in a relaxing family environment. (Yongchun, November 21, 2008)

Unlike during the Maoist decades when women's care of the family was considered a means to serve the country (Evans 2002), reform-era gender discourses herald women's concern for home and family as an end in itself. Mass media often explicitly endorse an elite ideal of "men leading the outer domain and women leading the inner domain (男主外女主内)," explicitly invoking a return to separate gendered spheres in presocialist Chinese society (Bray 1997; Ko 2005; Mann 1997, 2002). An elitist paradigm clearly unavailable to working-class and poor women, the vision of women's "preferred" sphere as an inner domain has now achieved broad ideological purchase in reform-era urban China.

This gender ideology finds expression in the recurring "women return home" (妇女回家) debates since the launch of market reforms (Jiang 2001; Ouyang 2003; Yang 2007).¹⁰ Arguing that encouraging women to work out-

side the home was a state imposition, high-profile scholars such as Sun Liping have suggested that it is better for women to stay home where they belong (Sun 1994). Focusing on whether women should quit their jobs and return home, these debates have reemerged during each economic downturn, as if "women returning home" provides a cure for economic crises encountered during critical moments in the process of market reform. Most recently, this line of argument resurfaced during national debates in 2001 focused on how economically independent urban women with good educations had intensified competition for the best professional and white-collar jobs, creating more pressure on men seeking those positions.

Women's commitment to work is also seen as a major cause of family conflict, while men's full engagement in paid employment is rarely questioned (Evans and Li 2007; Zhang 2006; see also Ting Chapter 6). Independent and successful career women, often labeled "strong women" (女强人), become seen as a "failing social gender" (失败的社会性别) (Yang 2007) because their outstanding performance in the workplace overshadows that at home. This tension between success at home and success in the workplace is thus particularly prominent among middle-class urban women and drives many of the challenges they are perceived to face in the marriage market.

As marriage itself is being redefined in the reform era and marital unions become increasingly fragile, unmarried women receive greater attention and even blame as a potential "source" of the problem. They often are criticized as "self-indulgent" and "picky," their selectiveness about a marriage partner portrayed as a threat to the social order. Such an attitude is well represented in the argument by two established scholars, Ye Wenzhen and Lin Qingguo:

Family relations formed through marriage can reinforce the married ones' sense of social responsibilities, on the one hand, and increase the social cost when they go off the rails, on the other hand. Hence, an increasing number of people staying out of marriage is not good for the stability of the social order. . . . Because the over-aged single women have high quality (高素质), they are very likely to be picked by married men as collaborators in extramarital emotional activities, which pose potential threats and challenges to existing marriage relations. (Ye and Lin 1998: 18)

It is in this contested field surrounding the gendered division of labor, women's entry into desirable white-collar professions, and efforts to redefine marriage as a tool of social control that the surplus women discourse emerged.

The active participation of the market-driven media seeking apolitical and entertaining content further popularized this sensational and provocative debate. Amplifying the logic and imagery of this discourse are the single successful young women featured in online blogging, television soap operas such as *My Queen*, novels such as *Shengnü's Golden Age*, and comic strips such as "Mr. Right Must Be Found." Local television channels used the opportunity to produce a series of matchmaking reality shows, such as *Take Me Out*, *Let's Date*, and *Go Forward for Love*, attracting a diverse audience across the boundaries of class and age.¹¹ Matchmaking agents using *shengnü* as an eye-catching phrase for marketing purpose have flourished online and offline. A matchmaking economy has thrived with great momentum from the discourse of *shengnü*, which in turn sustains the discourse in everyday life, creating a discursive field that reinforces the centrality of marriage, heightens the tensions among different social roles particularly for urban middle-class women, and exacerbates parental anxieties about their daughter's marital future.

In short, the proliferation of the *shengnü* discourse attests to the influence of a gender paradigm that privileges career accomplishment for men and marriage and homemaking for women. Urban middle-class women in China today, therefore, are caught between the revival of a selective, elitist gender ideology of the past; their parents' investments in their well-being; the nation-state's development agenda; intense job competition; and the media's market interests. The message that consistently emerges from these contradictory forces is that marriage is more essential for the female than the male life course, providing fertile ground for urban matchmaking corners to flourish.

PARENTAL MATCHMAKING CORNER: A PERSONAL BUSINESS THAT HAS BECOME PUBLIC

In the Shanghai matchmaking corner, 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; and some are workers. More than half of our interviewees had already retired. In terms of education, most had been to high school; occasionally they had college degrees.¹² Long-term local residents sat side-by-side with newcomers, most of whom had 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 had 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.

Many of these parents had been sent down to the countryside for reeducation in their teens during the Maoist years. 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" (大龄青年) whose own marriage problems were seen by some as a socially destabilizing force. 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.¹³

State intervention in the dating scene, however, was not unique to the post-Cultural Revolution era. One key feature of the CCP's plan for modernization was to free individuals from the authority of the family yet simultaneously subject them to that of the state. In line with these ambitions, before the Cultural Revolution stigmatized dancing and dating as "bourgeois" and "corrupt" (Whyte and Parish 1984), employers organized parties to provide occasions for singles to meet. In the early 1980s, dance parties and other matchmaking activities were again promoted via local Unions and the Youth Leagues. To those who were born and raised after 1949, such state interventions seemed unsurprising in the "cradle-to-grave" institutional background of the planned economy that was naturalized by decades of political mobilization.

The mass dating culture of the past left such a strong imprint on parents' own lives that many parents we interviewed called for government intervention to solve the problems of their children. On one Sunday, a woman handed us a note that read, "Government shall provide the platform to share our concerns for our children's marriage. Parents also do matchmaking for the children in the matchmaking corner in People's Park. By doing so we can expedite important business of marriage (婚姻大事)." She insisted that we convey their concern to the government. The mother whom we were interviewing concurred: "Only if the government, the Women's Federation would come to the stage—hold some activities for them, set a time, and [hold the activities]

several times a month. Once per week? Once a week is impossible. Then twice a month. Let the young people themselves find [their suitors in the activities]."

Another such person was Dong Chao, a shareholder and chief financial officer in a large company, who as a father questioned the absence of the government in the dating scene:

The government is taking care of the labor issue, but not marriage. What are you doing, Head of the Civil Affair Bureau? The Labor Bureau pays attention. At least each street committee has an office to handle job recommendations. But how about matchmaking? The train of thought of the government is problematic, including that of the central government. They deal with the employment issue at the level of social stability, but not the matchmaking issue. . . . People are the top priority (以人为本), [but] what is there without a family? . . . Why can't the government do something? 50,000 yuan is enough. It doesn't matter where the office is. At least you can have it in the street committee. The street committee is enough. Why don't they just do that? (Interview S31)

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 attitudes 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 had been a doctor before retirement, and her husband was a retired senior engineer who enjoyed a special allowance from the State Council. They had two apartments in downtown Shanghai. Their daughter had graduated from a prestigious university in Shanghai with a master's degree and was currently 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* (掉到自由市场来了). Everybody said that this [the matchmaking 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?" (Emphasis added; Interview S27)

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 (also see Zhang 2010). For many parents, providing an apartment for marriage 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 larger economic and social responsibilities in marriage. 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. As the previously mentioned Dong Chao put it:

You parents of boys, don't you know that boys are going to grow up? . . . Parents of boys have the responsibility [to provide the apartment for marriage]. . . . He must have an apartment at this age . . . As for the requirements of the apartment, if they have to live with the parents, it has to have one living room and three bedrooms. At least they would have a child. If not with the parents, it shall still have two bedrooms. In fact, I have two apartments. But the man would not live in our place. (Interview S31)

Dong Chao's situation was not an exception. 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. As a mother said, "Look, in the park, I don't know you, and you don't know me. If we don't talk about conditions, what can we talk about? There is obviously no emotional base to begin with" (Interview S6). Not to deny emotions or romantic feelings, parents frankly admitted that they were simply more practical than their daughters in mating choices.

Interestingly, on the one hand, parents put down the explicit terms for the potential suitors and justified such practices to themselves; on the other hand, they still lamented that a proper suitor now was defined only by physical and material conditions. In our interviews, parents sometimes contrasted the current practices to those of the past. Many parents stated that when they married they had no requirements other than compatible personalities and class composition (阶级成分). Dong Chao's wife described to us how she met and ended up marrying him: "I didn't tell him that he felt like a father figure after we first met. Later I dated him, but he didn't have an apartment. I still wanted him. I thought he was a nice person" (Interview S31).

A chief officer in a police station, Ruan Xiang spoke in even greater detail when asked about his own courtship:

At that time, dating often did not start with two people meeting each other but rather by being introduced to each other by someone in between. In our day, we paid attention to the person's character (人品) and whether the person was honest or not. We didn't ask the person where she or he worked and how much the salary was, because we all knew about the income. The salary was usually 36 yuan or 45 yuan. One would not have much more than the other. We paid close attention to character and family education (家教). Some families were relatively poor, but as long as the person had a real job, it was all the same. Women would like to find men who were relatively honest, good natured, and content with what they had. For men, the kind of women they were looking for were virtuous (贤惠), who could be a good wife and mother, take care of the family, be the housewife (主妇) as well as aid the husband and teach the child

(相夫教子) . . . Because of the notions formed during the long Cultural Revolution, we tried not to find those with bad class backgrounds. (Interview S28)

Yet careful examination reveals that parents did have material expectations and requirements besides good personalities and class background when they were young. 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 child care. In sum, couples 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 (Lü and Perry 1997; Yan 2003).

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 (历史使命). Do you understand? This is my duty. As a mother, I assume this [finding a suitor for the daughter] is my duty" (Interview S30).

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 (Farrer 2002, 2010), the young women in our interviews did not seem to share that 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 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. Dong Chao attributed his daughter's marriage problem to the corporate structure in contemporary Shanghai. He said,

In the past, a textile factory could have more than 10,000 people. It was very easy to find someone. Nowadays there are some companies with fewer than one hundred people. The actual social circle thus is much smaller. In our society . . . people who don't know each other will not socialize together. (Interview S31)

Many young women also worked in gender-segregated environments, as one mother described her daughter's situation:

When she goes to work, she sits in front of the computer all day. Her department does not have many young men. There are other departments too. But how can you go from one department to another at work? . . . She is very busy at work and under tremendous pressure. She does not have time to be exposed to the outside world. Her social circle is so limited! (Interview S34)

Seeing that their daughters lacked dating opportunities, some determined parents have been to the matchmaking corner for five years, whether rain or shine. Meanwhile, they are well aware of the low success rate here. Parents described their own endeavors in the matchmaking corner as hard work.

Uncle Yan's case is a nice illustration. When we approached Uncle Yan, he sat quietly near the lake, with a visibly anxious look on his face. Next to him was his daughter's information and academic certificates: born in 1978, 164 cm, and working in the R&D department of an American company with a monthly income between 5,000 and 6,000 yuan (roughly US\$714 and \$857 in 2008). There were also the requirements for the suitor: 175 cm in height, a stable job. In many people's eyes, Uncle Yan had a decent Shanghai-based family. He and his wife worked at the same research institute in Shanghai. They had two apartments in the city, one to live in and one to rent out. Besides the information about his daughter he displayed, his daughter had been to the United States and France respectively for two years for advanced training. Worried about his daughter's unmarried status, Uncle Yan became a frequenter of the matchmaking corner on the weekends. His endeavors were not without any return. Once he got the information of a young man who allegedly graduated from Fudan, one of the most esteemed institutions of higher learning in China, from another parent in the park. His daughter went to meet the young man but came back disappointed. As it turned out, the young man's educational experience was not quite as described. Uncle Yan and his daughter felt that the boy's parents had deceived them, and there was no follow-up after the first meeting. On another occasion, Uncle Yan found a possible suitor online. His daughter chatted several times with him, but, again, she was disappointed and told her father that she sensed the young man was arrogant and thought too highly of himself. Nevertheless, Uncle Yan was not discouraged:

Although the majority will not succeed, we can do nothing but come here to try our luck. Maybe there is an opportunity, right? Maybe we will meet the

suitable one. But it doesn't mean we would find someone once we come here (也不是说一定来了就要有什么收获). (Interview S23)

Uncle Yan admitted that the process was exhausting. "I think it is really tiring. . . . It is not easy for the parents, [but] . . . I don't think I have a choice; I have to take full responsibility for her."

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. Uncle Yan told us that his daughter had never dated anyone during her school time. He said, "When she was at school, she spent all her time studying. . . . As parents, we also thought that our child should focus on studying when she was at school, and focus on work when she was working. Parents are traditional."

Without identifying the people involved, Mr. Xiao criticized a person he knew who had imposed a "no dating during school time" policy, but now the mother had become frantic about finding her daughter a husband:

He isolated his daughter. If his daughter was dating a classmate, he immediately scolded her, "We parents raised you with great effort. You should not see anyone but focus on getting into college and finding a good job." They wanted their daughter to excel. Some classmate at school was interested in the daughter, but they were so protective that they did not allow her to stay in contact. Such a case is pretty common. Later, when the daughter reached the age of thirty, the mother began to feel regret: She should have let her go out dating. Now it is too late. All the good guys are married. (Interview S5)

Xia Feng was the kind of father Mr. Xiao described. Xia Feng became a sales representative after he retired from a factory as a worker. He has a son and a daughter, both of whom graduated with master's degrees from Fudan University. While his son easily found a wife, his daughter remained single, and he was deeply worried. He told us that his daughter used to be very popular at school:

In fact, one guy was very serious about her. But I didn't give my permission. . . . I said, "You are at school, and you should study. Being at school means ignoring what happens outside and focusing on your schoolwork. This is an absolute principle. . . . If you find someone who really likes you, you can date him after you graduate [from college]. If you date him now, you need to look

for jobs when you graduate, and you will be away from each other, right?" . . . I really didn't know the dating reality nowadays in Shanghai. . . . I will regret my behavior until my death. (Interview S9)

While the previous state-orchestrated mass dating culture conditioned this generation of parents to see marriage as something other than a personal or individual decision, parents also see themselves as shouldering an embarrassing task by seeking proper suitors in public venues. Parental matchmaking therefore is considered less as a form of interference or imposition of parental authority and more as a buffer zone that protects their daughter's dignity. The previously mentioned Uncle Yan said, "They [daughters] have self-esteem. The corner here is a low-class, aberrant place (档次很低的野路子); they would not like to be seen in such a place."

An old man who joined our conversation during our interview in the park echoed this parental concern:

You [young women] can't really go out to find a suitor. In the end, parents would ask other parents or friends, among the adults, to introduce you to suitors. You young girls won't look for a suitor yourself. You still want your face, right? It is impossible to do something like that, it is really embarrassing, right? . . . It is all for our children. If it were not for our children, who would come to places like this? Parents really have no other options. They actually don't like to talk about their children in public. [Daughters] are so busy at work. Time goes fast, and they are getting old. Really, it is a serious problem. We don't have options. Do you think we like to come to this place? We don't either. (Interview S35)

Hours of conversation with parents reveal a complicated picture of parental matchmaking practices in contemporary urban China that differ substantially from those of the late imperial era (Ebrey 1990, 1993; Mann 1997, 2002). 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 emotional, affectionate ties to their daughters 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.

Meanwhile, the legacy of the socialist period does directly impinge on the parental generation. For most of their lives, state or workplace authorities were involved in every stage of their intimate relationship, from matchmaking to applying to get married, and from mediating familial disputes to applying for divorce (Whyte and Parish 1984; also see Davis Chapter 2). Urban dwelling in the same period was notoriously crowded and lacked basic amenities (Lu 2006). Hallways used as cooking spaces and shared bathrooms were common features in state-sponsored housing. Vivid street life, now often viewed nostalgically as emblematic of a cozy neighborhood environment, was often a result of the lack of space at home. The spatial divide between the public-outer and the private-inner was quite blurred, and one lived under the constant gaze and scrutiny of neighbors, colleagues, work units, the Party, and the government. For this generation of parents, marriage was personal yet never private. The internalization of the gaze of the other seems to persist among this generation who grew up and lived through this period; through their views we can observe the continuing significance of public recognition in family and marriage practices in the postsocialist setting. It is because of such life experiences that parents accepted without pleasure the seemingly awkward matchmaking corner as a site to look for marital prospects for their beloved children.

But there are also clear differences from the norms of the socialist past, and all the parents we interviewed acknowledged that their children lived in a very different work environment from theirs. Their daughters had much more pressure and competition at work, with the constant threat of layoffs. Skyrocketing living and educational expenses make it far harder to maintain a household than in the 1980s when they were raising their children. For the younger generation, who do not have the benefit of state-sponsored housing, urban real estate prices have gone far beyond what many individuals can afford, and only by relying heavily on one or both sets of parents can a young couple buy an apartment (Davis 2010). Financial pressure, the lack of a well-orchestrated and implemented social welfare system, and the emotional bond among generations due to the one-child policy thus create ever-closer interdependence among family members of different generations.

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 wished 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 volatile world. Unlike filial piety that emphasizes children's moral obligations to their parents, in contemporary urban China, principles of enduring family obligation often highlight the parents' undying devotion to their children.

CONCLUSION

As key social institutions, marriage and family are now confronted with a variety of challenges in urban China, from strict limits on marital fertility (Davis Chapter 2), a dating culture among urban youth that displays an increasingly open attitude toward premarital sex (Farrer Chapter 3), and voluntary delays in marriage (Cai and Wang Chapter 4), to broader shifts in the courts and workplaces that have destigmatized divorce and even extramarital affairs (Davis and Friedman Chapter 1; Davis Chapter 2). These challenges bear similarities to forces that led to the "deinstitutionalization" of marriage in Western societies, as seen in the weakening of social norms as well as the diminished practical importance of marriage (Cherlin 2004). But whereas in North America and Europe broad cultural shifts prioritizing companionship and individual choice drove marital changes, in China the party-state's deliberate decision to introduce market reforms and to reduce control over and intervention in citizens' intimate lives has often been decisive. As a result, individuals of different generational, gender, and class backgrounds now have greater freedom to renegotiate the meanings of marriage but within the new pressures of a highly competitive market economy and the state's rigid limitations of the one-child policy.

The existence of parental matchmaking corners indicates, however, 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 the inner domain"—on contemporary matchmaking expectations and strategies. Despite the elitist roots of this gender paradigm, it has been rearticulated as an ostensibly universal ideal precisely at a time when educational opportunities and new middle-class jobs have made educated women more competitive with their male counterparts in the "outer domain." Although the parents who frequent Shanghai's matchmaking corner rarely if ever contest the surplus women discourse and remain committed to finding the right match for their daughters, some young women have begun to reappropriate the *shengnü* discourse to assert their own "refusal to compromise"

(不能将就) when it comes to marriage and pursuing an individually desirable lifestyle.

Given the intense, intergenerational bonds created by the one-child policy and solidified by the economic insecurities of the reform era, it is not surprising either that parents remain anxious about their daughter's marital future or 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.

The practices of parental matchmaking also reveal the everlasting presence of a public gaze in marriage practices, despite the increasing turn to private preferences in cases involving marital dissolution. As shown in the cases we describe in the preceding pages, parental anxieties are often framed through the real or imagined gaze of others: how others might view their presence in the matchmaking corner and what these others might say about their daughters. Parents' experiences of such a public gaze derive from earlier participation in group dating and from histories of close monitoring of their intimate lives by work units and supervisors. Even though the political and social settings in which the public gaze was embedded have been removed, the internalization of that gaze has made it possible for parents to enter the matchmaking corner, albeit unpleasantly, and to transform their daughter's personal business into a public event. Carefully unpacking the diverse motivations behind parental matchmaking practices thus allows us to understand the complex political, economic, and cultural crosscurrents that shape the meanings of marriage and family in urban China today.

NOTES

This paper is partly based on research conducted for the project "Parental Matchmaking and Marketization of Mating Choice: On the Matchmaking Corner in People's Park in Shanghai" in East China University of Political Sciences and Law, 2010 (Project Number: 10H2K032).

1. All the direct interview quotations in this chapter were excerpts from interviews conducted in the matchmaking corner of Shanghai's People's Park from September 2007 through June 2008, with follow-up interviews conducted in 2009. Interviews were originally in Mandarin, translated into English by the authors.

2. Our research was designed to focus more on the parents than the daughters, and our interviews with the daughters were designed to study what they thought about their parents' actions. Although we have interviews that indicate the daughters' perceptions of love and marriage, our findings generally support Farrer's insights into urban youth dating culture (Chapter 3).

3. Having heard about Beijing's matchmaking corner, six parents organized a similar one in Shanghai's People's Park in June 2005. They distributed leaflets to passersby, encouraging the parents to become involved in finding marriage prospects for their children. The first meeting attracted more than 100 people, and over 500 showed up for subsequent meetings. The corner became well known after a local Shanghai TV channel featured a special report on the corner in August 2005 (Zhu and Hu 2006).

4. We acknowledge that the term *class* (阶级) is ideologically loaded, especially in China, and terms such as *middle stratum* (中产阶级) are often preferred in everyday language. However, because the focus of the article is not the formation of class, we use the term *class* loosely to refer to the midrange social group in society, a group that distinguishes itself by often office-based, white-collar jobs that typically require a college education.

5. In the four-year colleges, the number of female students as a percentage of the total number of students rose from 23.4 percent in 1980 to 39.2 percent in 2000 (Song 2006).

6. Studies point out that, since the initiation of market reforms, married couples increasingly have resembled each other in education and class background (Zhang 2003). Li Yu's study shows that fewer mate choices cross class boundaries, and educational homogamy has increased dramatically in the past decade (2008). In line with Li, Yi and Zhao argue that higher education is a watershed point in the marriage market. Regardless of gender, people with college education tend to look for partners who also have a college education (2007). For age hypergamy, see Chapter 4.

7. Our discussion focuses mostly on women and assumes a gender paradigm of binary sexes. Without denying diversity in gender and sexual practices, we note that the binary gender model and heterosexuality still represent the cultural and legal mainstream in contemporary China. Meanwhile, due to space constraints, we do not discuss the changing social role of men and masculinity.

8. We have not found evidence that the age of thirty is a transitional moment concerning women's marriage status. Instead, analysis of online discussion and our interviews show that stress is built up substantially in the mid- and late twenties for urban single women, which to some degree coincides with the mean marriage age nationwide (Cai and Wang Chapter 4).

9. The term *failing dog* means the dog that fails in dog competitions. It originally came from Japan and gained popularity in China due to the Taiwanese soap opera *My Queen*, in which the leading character is a successful single career woman aged thirty-three.

10. The "women-return-home" debate was mostly among scholars, including some prominent scholars such as Sun Liping and Li Yinhe, in the mid-1990s. The debate was divided along gender lines, with male scholars advocating that women return home and female scholars arguing the opposite. For their arguments, see the 1994 and 1995 issues of the leading social science journal in China, *Shehuixue Yanjiu* (*Journal of Sociological Studies*).

11. The Chinese title of the TV soap opera *My Queen* is *Baiquan Nüwang* (败犬女王); *My Queen* is its original English title. The novel *Shengnü's Golden Age* is named *Shengnü de Quansheng Shidai* (剩女的全盛时代), by Liu Su (Guilin: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2010). The author of the novel *Shengnü's Golden Age* claimed that she wove the stories of her friends together into the novel. The comic strip "Must Be Found the Mr. Right" (original English title) has as its Chinese title "一定可以嫁出去," by Yun Qin and Shuyi Zeng (Guilin: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2010). These two authors were single women born in the 1980s. They were published first online and then in paperback. These print media are complemented by reality TV shows such as *Take Me Out* (非诚勿扰), *Let's Date* (让我们约会吧), and *Go Forward for Love* (为爱向前冲).

12. Such an educational distribution coincides with the educational pattern of their peers, as the Cultural Revolution and the "sent down youth" movement deprived many members of this generation of their educational opportunities during the 1960s and 1970s.

13. See *People's Daily's* reports on days such as June 20, July 3, September 8, and December 27, 1984; and January 2, March 1, and May 8, 1985.

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Part II