
Chwen Yiing Lim

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LITERATURE REVIEW ESSAY

FINDING THAT PERFECT MATCH:
CHANGING ATTITUDES AND DYNAMICS IN THE
MATCHMAKING AND MARRIAGE MARKETS

Submitted by: Lim Chwen Yiing (MACC/HSS)
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INTRODUCTION

As the Chinese adage goes, “a marriage match is linked by fate across a thousand mile” (千里姻缘一线牵). The union between two people has been credited to the legend of Yue-Lao (月下老人; the man under the moon) who was believed to be the first matchmaker documented in the Chinese mythology. He mandates over marriages by connecting couples who are destined to be together with a red silk string around their ankles.

The present-day matchmaker has long shed the imagery of Yue-Lao’s grinning, bearded figure. The Chinese cupid now takes on various forms and formats – from popular TV matchmaking shows, to dating websites boosting millions of registered users, and to specialized services that come with a hefty price tag to search for the perfect one. In a society that attaches great importance to marriage and stresses family as its basic unit, the marriage market in China – where men and women compete with one another to find their life companions – is experiencing profound changes in its landscape and dynamics.

To understand what gave rise to the current state of Chinese marriage scene, it is imperative to examine this phenomenon against the backdrop of two major national policies – i.e. economic reforms and one-child policy – that have significantly affected China in the last 30 years. While successful in meeting their intended objectives, the vital interplay between both policies has unfurled a chain of repercussions that modified the ‘rules of the games’ in the marriage market and also shifted the matchmaking business into high gear in the past decade, especially when the first generation of single child birth cohort entered marriageable age.

In reviewing past efforts in Chinese marriage market research, scholars have generated substantial literature mostly in the areas of implications, such as gender imbalances, marriage
migration, marriage squeeze, divorce and remarriage patterns, and marriage quality, etc. Although the topic has been well-documented by sociologists, the matchmaking market boom and emerging paradigm of new attitudes among eligible men and women are recent developments that could be traced to the implementation of the earlier-mentioned policies and have re-shaped the market since. These developments are of further research interest.

This literature review will be categorized into two themes: first, past research examining external market influence forces will be discussed from developments in the three areas of legislation, economic and socio-cultural; and second, on how internal market changes, such as new matchmaking practices and industry changes, have impacted the market dynamics. Selection of the literature is based the following considerations:

1. The articles and chapters focus on topics of social changes and forces which are shaped by institutions, such as legislation, economy that are central to the study of sociology.
2. A mix of writings by Chinese and Western scholars to offer diverse perspectives in investigating the topic.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**External Market Influence Forces**

**LEGISLATION**

The one-child policy implemented in 1980 has radically altered the social landscape of China. While effective in slowing down population growth and contributing to the stellar, sustained economic development, fault lines have emerged and the resultant societal cost is rising. Wang (2005) warned that the high costs and dire consequences include forceful alteration of family structure, imbalance sex ratio and rapidly aging population, etc. These three factors have significant impact on the marriage market.
ECONOMIC

Principles of economics have long been applied to the study of behavioral and social sciences. Becker (1974) proposed that marriage can be analyzed through modern economics framework as a marriage market is thought to be in place because of the competition among men and women. With basis of analysis grounded in economics, this raises two distinct phenomena that are observed in the marriage market: commodification and consumerism.

Commodification

In Marxist theory, commodification refers to the conversion of non-goods or non-saleable items into a commodity, thus giving it market value. Applying to modern day relations, Zelizer (2005) argued, ‘the logic of the marketplace has increasingly penetrated our most intimate social relations of family and community’ and people used economics activity to create, maintain, and renegotiate important ties – especially intimate ties – with other people.

Supporting a similar argument is Constable (2009) who maintained that intimate and personal relations are become increasingly and explicitly commodified. She defined commodification as ‘the ways in which intimacy or intimate relations can be treated, understood, or thought of as if they have entered the market: are bought or sold; packaged and advertised; fetishized, commercialized, or objectified…’ (Constable, 2009, p. 50). Commodification of love and romance can take many forms, such as gift exchanges and material expectations. And such commodification is intertwined with a condition of exchange in commitment which can be explained using the Maussian principle of gift. French sociologist Marcel Mauss argued that gifts are never “free” and that human history is full of examples that gifts give rise to reciprocal exchange (Mauss, 1967). Such transactions can be commonly observed among the Chinese with news reports often showing women receiving expensive cars and jewelry from
suitors in return for their love. This marks a departure from paradoxical assumption that money and intimacy belong to two separate spheres.

**Consumerism**

China’s reform and opening up process is a miracle story to the world and the robust economic growth has also redefined the marriage market. With newfound freedom, abundance of choice and greater economic mobility, the growing consumerism has modeled our worldview. It has been observed that the current dating scene is “symbolically and practically shaped by the commercial society” from where fulfilling individual desires is a result of the new consumer culture in China (Zheng, 2013, p. 325; Wang & Nehring, 2013; Yan, 2010) For instance, the materialistic attitude has been reflected in a famous Chinese TV matchmaking show where a young Beijing model, Ma Nuo, said that she would rather cry at the back of a BMW when asked if she would like to go cycling with her suitor. As a result, she is infamously labelled as a “gold-digger” because of her remarks (Li, 2011).

With the proliferation of dating websites and TV shows, eligible men and women are presented with more options to choose from. They openly declare their partner criteria and decide on their preference from the available selection as if it is a shopping trip. The easy access of online information about bachelors and bachelorettes as well as matchmaking fairs organized by companies have value-added to the “shopping experience” (Zheng, 2013).

In linking economic forces to social changes, Yan (2010) recognized that the opening up of China to market economy and the acculturation to consumerism ideology have also ushered in new changes in individual responsibility, self-reliance and a culture of intimacy.
Socio-cultural

Individual rights and individualization

Market reforms have brought about an increased understanding of individual rights. Yan (2010) suggested that the search for romantic love and marriage freedom in the late 1970s has led to the liberalization of marriage law and increasing awareness of sexual rights in the 1980-90s. What used to be stigmatized and deemed inappropriate in the public eye has now surfaced. Rofel (as cited in Yan, 2007, p. 505) pointed out that material and emotional desires are now discussed, negotiated, and celebrated over various public platforms including, mass media, Internet and social interactions. Those seeking love see it as their personal right to pursue what they yearn for and even have no qualms about proclaiming that they are looking for tall, rich and handsome men (高富帅) or fair, rich and gorgeous ladies (白富美).

Growing individualism is another reason that Asians are less willing to sacrifice their personal ambitions for their families (Huang, 2005). With higher education and good careers, Huang (2005) argued that women are empowered with more choice to opt out of abusive and unacceptable relationships. Unfortunately, older single women, who live up to individualism and are independence and competent, are often rejected by men who are intimated by their achievements. Labeled as sheng nu (剩女), they are often blamed for their high expectations that left them in their predicament (To, 2013). Sit (2014) suggested that this liberated generation of women is constrained by the discourse which has been sustaining the unequal relations. To (2013) further argued that this is a result of the patriarchal society structure that led to the “discriminatory and controlling gendered constraints” against the left-over women.

Despite these challenges, a 2010 World Bank paper reported that the marriage market in China seems to take better care of women as regardless of their educational background.
They enjoy nearly universal marriage, and are able to engage more easily in hypergamy, choosing spouses of higher status and income (Das Gupta, Ebenstein & Sharygin, 2010).

However, despite the widespread of consumerism, culture still exerts influence on attitude towards love and marriage (Higgin, Zheng, Liu & Sun, 2002). In their study, the more traditional gender roles and values are present in more than eight in 10 of those surveyed.

**Parental influence**

The one-child policy in China has led to a new generation of protective parents. All support and investment are placed on that single child that could give them advantage in education, job and the marriage market (Fong, 2002). The high aspirations for their child’s achievement in education and career have possibly produced strong, competitive and independent daughters who run the risk of becoming *sheng nu* (To, 2013).

When individualism sets in, arranged marriages seem to have given way to free love matches. But He and Whyte (1990) argued that this is untrue as parents still play somewhat dominant role in 11-43% of marriages. Parent matchmaking distorts children’s spousal choice as they look upon money as an important consideration (Huang, Jin & Xu, 2012). Their studies have shown that 16% of urban couples who married with parental involvement enjoy less harmonious relationships than those married by self-match. The influence also stretches to a new growing phenomenon of so-called “marriage marketplace” that have appeared in parks in major cities where parents eagerly seek out spouses for their only child (Larmer, 2013).

**Imbalance sex ratio**

The adoption of the one-child policy has also led to an imbalance sex ratio at birth (Wang, 2005). Porter (as cited in Lafortune, 2009, p. 155) believed that higher sex ratios lead women
having greater bargaining power and able to marry better mates in terms of health, age and height. Furthermore, changes in the sex ratio also affect the pre-marital investments (such as, education, career choices and literacy) and such investments are said to increase the chances of matching and bargaining power (Lafortune, 2009).

Internet culture on matchmaking

While traditional matchmaking takes on a one-to-one approach each session, Internet matchmaking expands the choices vastly. Constable (2009) saw that the Internet technology redefined intimacy landscapes by linking geographically dispersed individuals together. Singles from different geographical locations and nationalities are able to connect over the Internet and it has become a matchmaking option for savvy people in this age of modernism and technological advancement (Li, 2011). The ease of use and free from commitment proposition is attractive to many seeking love on the Internet. It can facilitate interaction and social network expansion at a faster speed and with a lower cost (Zheng, 2013).

Internal Market Changes

In a 2012-2013 Report about Marriage Values among Young Chinese jointly published by the National Population and Family Planning Commission and the largest matchmaking portal in China, Jiayuan.com, it was found that 249 million unmarried Chinese are above the age of 18. Among the unmarried population in the post-1970s, 80s and 90s, there are about 23 million more males than females, and men are found to be more anxious than women to get into dating, relationship and marriage (Xu, 2013).

Boom in online marriage brokers

The growth of matchmaking websites in China has been phenomenal, with the establishment of the pioneer matchmaking website, Zhenai.com, in 1998. According to China.org.cn, the
total number of registered users from the top three websites – Jiayuan.com, Baihe.com and Zhenai.com – peaked at over 150 million. The sites typically feature online dating, real-life blind dating activities and even make recommendations on date partners after a love-psychology test. Furthermore, the success rates are rather commendable too as they claimed, with Jiayuan.com having sparked over three million marriages and about 7,000 users daily changing their status to “in a relationship” or “married” (Xu, 2013).

This is also a lucrative market to be in. These websites have mature revenue models for offering love searches and the cost for using basic email services ranges from 198 – 499 yuan per year (Zheng, 2013). A New York Times report had analysts who predicted that, with more singles taking up searches online and thousands of dating and marriage websites hitting the market, the industry will soon surpass $300 million annually (Larmer, 2013).

**Reality TV matchmaking shows**

Among the top ten most popular shows on Chinese television in 2012, three spots were taken by matchmaking shows. The most well-known is Jiangsu TV’s “If You Are The One”, a reality TV show that attempts to pair up couples over a 20-minutes brief interaction. It is said that the proliferation of TV dating shows has met the demands of singles under their stressful social environment (Li, 2011). Not only has the show garnered high ratings, it also gained popularity among singles with over 140,000 candidates submitted applications to join the program since it began airing in 2010 (Li, 2011).

**Specialized services**

The rise of the nouveau rich class in China gave rise to a new breed of matchmakers who offered specialized spouse hunting services. The services include “talent spotting” potential candidates for their clients, complete background checks, make recommendations and
arrange meetings. It was reported that clients could pay anything from tens of thousands of dollars to over a million to land that perfect match (Larmer, 2013).

**CONCLUSION**

No other country has possibly experienced the twin dynamos of rapid economic liberalization and radical demographic structural change through birth control policy like China. This has impacted a generation of men and women who entered the marriage market with new attitudes and expectations based on the socialization process they underwent as well as the strong consumerism culture that has flooded China today.

Intimate relationships are commodified, materialism triumphs over true love, increased awareness of individual rights and no inhibition in expressing their desires, living under the shadow of parental influence and consequences of an imbalance sex ratio as well as harnessing the power of instant connectivity over the Internet – all these accounted for the changes in the current marriage market. The social and psychological factors as well as market forces driving the lucrative dating business are altering the landscape and views about marriage in China.

With traditional boundaries being pushed, the unique situation in China has created a new wave of attitudes and market dynamics. With China poised to continue its economic growth while the one-child policy is slowly loosening up, it will be of interest to understand if these attitudes have shifted with the matchmaking market boom and what will be the implications for China.
REFERENCES


