CHAPTER 5: What Women Want
Male Singleness from the Perspective of the Gatekeepers

Much of the research on singleness in China up to this point has focused on single women, despite there being significantly more single men demographically. This discrepancy was reflected in the visibility of single women during my fieldwork. I visited marriage markets in four cities. At each one, I was struck by what appeared to be a greater number of fliers for single women than single men. This seemed counterintuitive given the well-documented gender imbalance of the country. I initially hoped to quantify this discrepancy at a market by counting the number of fliers featuring men versus women, but the disorganization at many of the markets made this task nearly impossible. One exception was the market held in a park in Chengdu, which, like the one in Wuhan, employed a color-coded system of blue and pink paper to denote male vs female (see Chapter 5A). However, unlike Wuhan's market, there were no inconsistencies with the color of fliers,[213] nor time limitations regarding the fliers' display.[214] In Chengdu, the fliers were neatly arranged and segregated by gender. On a relatively quiet Wednesday afternoon, I systematically documented and mapped out the fliers to determine the actual distribution of female to male representation (see Figure 76 and 77). My count revealed approximately 730 pink (female) and 615 blue (male) fliers. Similar findings have been documented in marriage markets in Beijing (Gui, 2016).

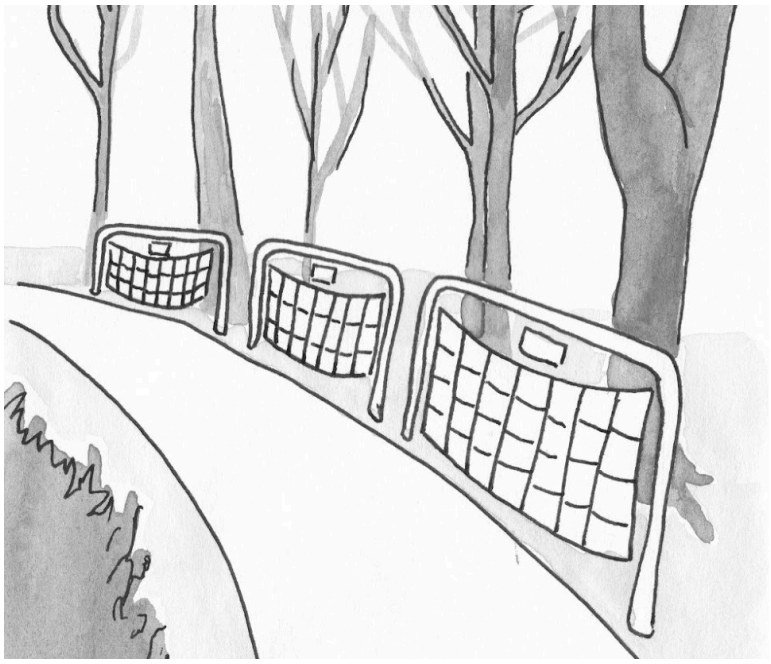

Figure 76. Illustration of the layout of Chengdu's marriage market. Illustrations by author.

[213] Wuhan would also randomly use yellow fliers which did not seem to denote any particular demographic - only the matchmaker associated with their case.

[214] Wuhan's fliers were only up during the 3-4 allotted hours scheduled for the marriage market. All fliers were taken down when the markets were not in session. Meanwhile the Chengdu fliers were up all 24/7.

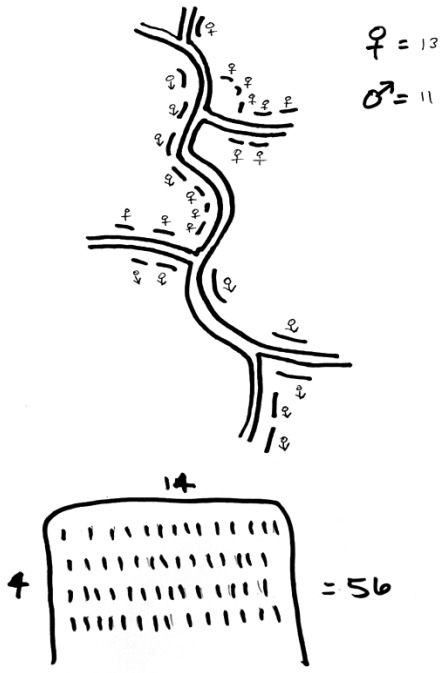

Figure 77. *Diagram of the layout of Chengdu's marriage market. Diagram by author.*

I initially wondered if this discrepancy between the number of pink and blue fliers versus the number of overall single men and women in China might be attributed to single men living outside of major cities in more rural areas. While I could not verify a definitive reason, I found a clue during a conversation with a 21-year-old college student browsing the Chengdu market. As I counted the fliers, the bookish woman with long black hair and large wire-rimmed glasses was reading the laminated blue sheets, searching for a potential boyfriend. She explained that she did not have a flier advertising her own, and preferred not to advertise herself publicly, citing embarrassment and fear of looking too desperate. She instead preferred to contact men herself if she found anyone who met her standards. This suggested the fliers were not proportional to the actual number of singles living in a particular city and depict an incomplete reflection of who participates in the marriage markets. The displayed fliers only represent a subset of market participants.

The young woman's approach to dating echoed Jiang's passive strategy to dating (see Chapter 4). While different genders, their means of finding a mate seemed to underscore a broader pattern in dating that divided people up by "consumers", or those who shop the marriage markets, and those "consumed", who are on display waiting to be selected. The distinction appeared to be linked to social status. Those with more to offer, higher status individuals who have accrued more social capital, could afford the social embarrassment of being publicly perceived, and be more selective when a potential suitor approaches them.

When I asked the female student why she thought there were more pink fliers than blue, she responded with a phrase that had become all too familiar:

> 优秀的女孩太多，优秀的男孩却不多
> (yōuxiù de nǚhái tài duō, yōuxiù de nánhái què bù duō)
> Too many excellent girls, not many excellent boys.

The idea of Chinese girls being "too excellent" is a relatively recent development, tied to their rising social status in the wake of China's OCP (also see Zhang & Sun, 2014). As the only daughters in many families, these women have received unprecedented levels of investment and support (Fong, 2014). The result has been a surge in female achievement, with China now home to "the highest percentage of self-made female billionaires in the world" (Lake, 2018, p. 6). This is not to say that Chinese men are not also succeeding. However, in a society where hypergamy remains the norm, women's relative rise in status creates a mismatch, leaving more women out of men's leagues, thus complicating traditional gender dynamics.

The perceived mismatch of quality between genders was a recurring theme in my conversations throughout my research. Using the logic of this college-aged woman, only those with something to offer (excellence) were worth marketing themselves. While I did not ask the Chengdu student whether she considered herself "excellent", many of the college-aged women I spoke with were actively prioritizing their education and future careers over romance. Most delayed pursuing relationships until they were finished with schooling and established in their desired fields. For most of the women I interviewed, singleness was not a stigma that needed to be urgently remedied, but a strategic choice that allowed them to advance their social capital in order to better position themselves in the future marriage market, when they are ready to settle down. Among the twenty-one unmarried women I interviewed for this project over the last seven years, the overwhelming majority expressed disinterest in marriage altogether or a displayed a willingness to delay marriage until the "right man" was found.

This chapter examines male singleness from the lens of female singleness, where women are the consumers, so to speak, and men the ones being considered for consumption. Whereas much of the existing literature on Chinese singleness focuses on the *shengnu*[215] (so-called "leftover women") emphasizing the struggles experienced by highly-educated women in securing partnership due to their perceived overqualification (see Feldshuh, 2018; Fincher, 2014; Gui, 2020; Lake, 2018; Liu, 2025; To, 2013; Yu, 2019), I argue that this framing overlooks the influence women hold in shaping the terms of marriage. Acknowledging that women still face disadvantages, such as age discrimination tied to ideas of fertility, it is also important to recognize that many women are successfully able to delay marriage or forgo the process completely. For those who do wish to marry, their relative scarcity and perceived "excellence" give them more leverage on the dating market than the generations of women that preceded them. The state and Chinese society more generally have sought to guilt women into marriage, which has worked on some, and not on others. Through five case studies, this chapter explores how women navigate the pressures of compulsory coupledom and, in doing so, are actively changing contemporary definitions of desirable masculinity.

[215] A play on the homonym "shengnü" (圣女), or "saintly women." (Zheng & Sun 2014, p. 124)

I begin by outlining the societal perceptions of single women, including common anxieties about marriage and ideal traits in a partner, before turning to five case studies that illustrate how expectations operate as structural filters in the dating market. The state's narrative, which pathologizes female singleness to address the demographic crisis it helped create, obscures the reality that it is men who now face growing social pressure to meet unattainable elevated standards. In an era marked by a wide gender imbalance, women have gained greater leverage in romantic selection. As arbiters of desirable masculinity, their romantic and marital decisions are shaped by class, education, familial dynamics, and cultural norms, which determine which men can fulfill the socially valorized roles of provider, protector, and procreator, and which men are left behind, doomed to be single forever.

Shengnu: A Brief Overview

The overrepresentation of single women's fliers in the marriage markets mirrors their disproportionate visibility in both academic and public discourse on singleness. Within single and gender studies related to China, scholarly focus has been placed far more on the estimated seven million *shengnu*[216] (Gu, 2022) than the estimated 35 million *shengnan* ("leftover men"). This imbalance is evident even in a cursory Google Scholar search with terms like "China" and "Singleness." The first few pages of results are all articles about women's experiences. While the documentation provides important insight into the pressures faced by unmarried women, it also invites a closer look at how male singleness is affected by the decisions of their female counterparts.

The gender imbalance is also reflected in state-sponsored news media coverage of singleness. Media studies experts, Wanqi Gong, Caixie Tu & L. Crystal Jiang (2017), found that mainland China over-reports and stigmatizes female over male singleness. The authors suggest that this discrepancy is state-manufactured, reflecting narratives that frame women as to blame for the singleness epidemic, especially as they delay marriage to pursue educational and career advancement (p. 201). By contrast, men's ambition, or desire to marry later, is not pathologized.

State Narratives and Law

The PRC's interest in regulating women's marital timelines appears to be directly linked to state anxieties over the well-documented population decline (Qiu et al., 2025; Yan, 2021; Winter & Teitelbaum, 2017). Sociologist Leta Hong Fincher (2014) argues that the state's "*shengnu* hysteria" was a strategy to "upgrade the population quality" by getting high-status women to reproduce (p. 30). In fact, it was the All-China Federation of Women, a government agency, that coined the term "*shengnu"* in 2007 in an attempt to shun and blame single women for the stagnation in population growth (Gong et al., 2017, p. 199). The term was selected as the most popular new word of the year, while the male equivalent, *shengnan*, received little recognition (Miao, 2010, in Gong et al., 2017, p. 198). This discursive asymmetry reflects the state's attempt to pathologize female singleness, framing it as a social problem that needs to be solved. This strategic move was a deliberate attempt to shame women into marriage via name-calling. The unmarried women were also compared to "yellowed pearls", implying they had aged and lost value (Fincher, 2014, p. 11).

[216] Any Chinese woman who is not married by 27. (Gong et al, 2017, p. 198)

The government incorrectly assumed that women would be compelled by the pressure of their "ticking biological clocks" to settle for less desirable partners and marry sooner (Gong et al., 2017, p. 201). Meanwhile, male biology, which is equally important in the productive process, was notably absent from such narratives.

The state's patronizing messaging is further evidenced by articles published by the same federation. For an agency that claims to advocate for women's rights and interests, titles like "Do Leftover Women Deserve Our Sympathy?" and "Eight Single Moves to Escape the Leftover Woman Trap" suggest female singleness is a personal failing rather than a legitimate choice (Fincher, 2014, p. 11). The Federation's rhetoric tends to serve demographic concerns rather than advancing women's autonomy in choosing whether or not they want to marry. Within this framework, women's decisions are politicized, given that the declining desirability of men is rooted in social and economic factors that are structural, not individual.

State narratives regarding marriage are grounded in long-standing social norms that reinforce gendered timelines for marriage. The belief that women should marry earlier than men, for instance, is deeply rooted in Chinese society and reflected in the historical evolution of marriage laws. Since the dynastic period, a consistent two-year age gap has existed between men and women ("Love and Marriage", 2025). The Tang Dynasty was the first to institute marital age regulations, setting a minimum age of 15 for "men" and 13 for "women." By the twentieth century, these ages were raised to 20 for men, and 18 for women (ibid). Today, the legal ages are currently 22 and 20, the highest in the world (UN Data, 2025).[217] Over the last 1300 years, this persistent age gap has undoubtedly normalized the gendered association between youth, femininity, and marital value for women while also reinforcing that men must delay marriage until they are financially and socially stable.

Ideologies of Women's Age and Fertility

Ideas of women needing to marry sooner than men are partially linked to beliefs about female fertility. Chinese Sociologist Tianhan Gui's (2016) research on Beijing marriage markets found that women over thirty were not as successful on the market because of a belief that they were "less fertile" after their twenties (p. 1938; see also Pettier, 2020). Meanwhile, it was not uncommon for men in their forties to pair with women in their 20s. The author notes that at most of the parent organized markets (see Chapter 3), "single women's parents significantly outnumbered single men's parents" due to "women's parents [being] much more anxious about their daughters' marriage timing, because women's pool of eligible partners diminishes more significantly than men's as they age" (Gui, 2016, p. 1932). One mother who had been attending the market for years to find a mate for her thirty-something single daughter noted a marked difference in the popularity her daughter received at 28 and 29 versus in her thirties (p. 1938). Another mother commented about a 32-year-old single woman, saying that she was "so old, how can she be that picky!" (p.

[217] These ages come from the 1980 Marriage Law revisions which sought to slow the population; there has recently been talk of lowering the ages to 18 for men and women to both increase the fertility rate as well as match the world standard. Reuters (2025) China adviser pushes to lower legal marriage age to 18 to boost birthrate. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-adviser-pushes-lower-legal-marriage-age-18-boost-birthrate-2025-02-25/#:~:text=The%20legal%20age%20for%20marriage%20in%20China%20is%2022%20for,base%20and%20unleash%20reproductive%20potential.%22

1938). It is clear from these comments that most parents searching for husbands for their adult daughters have bought into the lore of female value depreciating after 30-years-old.

Men also buy into this ideology of men and women having different relationships to age. An interview with a single man at one of these markets reiterated the same message, where he matter-of-factly stated, "men don't age as quickly as women."[218] In short, the messaging suggests that as women age, their value on the market decreases, making them eligible to more men in a system of hypergamy. This imbalance of female vs. male representation at the market again reflects the focus of women as time-sensitive commerce, whereas men have a longer expiration date and can remain consumers longer.

Similarly, discrimination due to perceived fertility was portrayed on a national matchmaking game TV show. *Chinese Dating* is different from many other dating shows, as men and their parents collaborate to select a female partner. In the first episode of the show, a single woman, Lin Jiali was initially very popular among the selection of women as she highlighted her ability to cook, leading the men to believe "Whoever picks her will be looked after."[219] That was until it was revealed that she was forty years old, at which point all the men and their parents voted her off the show. One mother justified her decision by stating, "I hope my daughter-in-law will give birth to two to three kids," implying that Lin would be unable to bear children due to her advanced age. Such televised actions reinforce the belief that women have an expiration date whereas men do not.

Parental pressure also remains a significant force to encourage women to marry, sometimes even taking the form of emotional manipulation. Anthropologist Jean-Baptiste Pettier (2020) documented the case of a high-earning single woman whose mother used the silent treatment to pressure her daughter to find a mate. She recounts her mother stopped saying hello to her, only asking "if I met any potential partners the previous day" (Pettier, 2020, p. 14). The woman displayed resilience, comparing the emotional neglect to the presence of flies in the summer, stating that, "It's annoying, but after a while, you get used to it" (p. 15). This example illustrates how pressure to marry comes from multiple directions, both at the macro level of the state and at the micro level within intimate interpersonal relationships. As we will see in the following sections, there are other cultural dimensions that provide alternative messaging that complicate and contradict these convictions.

What Women Want (Seeking Better)

When and if Chinese women do choose to marry, their higher social status and relative demographic scarcity afford them a level of selectiveness unknown to previous generations. Earlier cohorts of women often married out of necessity. As the CEO of a popular Chinese dating app recalled, her grandmother once told her, "If you want clothes on your back and food to eat, get married" (Osnos, 2014, p. 65). Women of that generation had little bargaining power in marriage. "As long as you had the most basic requirements, I'd marry you," her grandmother added (p. 66). In contrast, high-earning women approach marriage with greater autonomy. "If there's anything I

[218] (Rauhala, 2018)
[219] Wang, L. (2016 Dec 27) Bachelorettes Vie for Parental Approval on New Dating Show. *Sixth Tone.* https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1749

don't like about you, well, you're out of luck," she explained (p. 66). In just two generations, many women have shifted from waiting to be chosen to becoming the choosers themselves: from product to consumer. Today's generation of highly-eligible bachelorettes now expect more than the bare minimum from a prospective spouse.

But what is it that they want in a man? A China Daily infographic from a reader poll (Figure 78) illustrated a gendered mismatch in expectations and desires. Men prioritize becoming a father and therefore seek women who want children, consistent with Gui's (2016) findings that physical attributes that reflect one's health in the form of youth and beauty are prized in female partners (p. 1923). In contrast, women seek financial stability, listing "economic strength" as the most desirable trait in a man, which also reflects Gui's conclusion that women prefer men with higher degrees and income levels (ibid). Both of these gendered desires reflect a biologically deterministic narrative that women, viewed as having limited reproductive time, are encouraged to maximize their marriage prospects before thirty, when they are seen as most "valuable," whereas men are believed to have more time to improve their financial standing and thereby become a more competitive marital option.

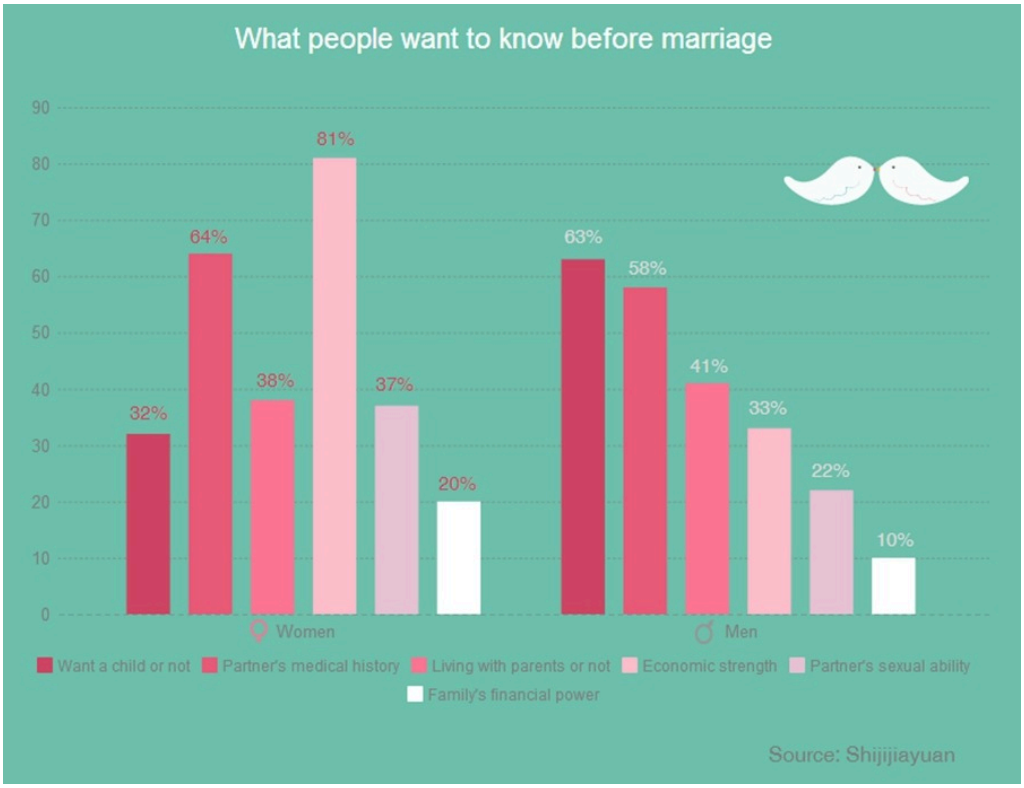

Figure 78. *Infographic of "What men vs women want to know before marriage." Wu, Y. (2017 Jan 12) Stingy vs lavish: Singles reveal top issue in pressures of marriage.* China Daily. *https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-01/12/content_27939968.htm*

As a result, many women eliminate men who do not meet basic economic criteria. Rural migrant workers who lack property, stable jobs, or dependable incomes are dubbed *sanwu*[220] (triple

[220] 三无" (sānwú) - "triple without," aka 三无男人" (sānwú nánrén), denoting a man who lacks a house, a car, and stable income therefore not viable for marriage

without) and are largely excluded from the marriage markets (Osnos, 2014, p. 43). Marriage with such a man would constitute a *luohun*[221] (naked wedding), referring to unions without a house, car, or bride price (ibid). Still, not all women prioritize wealth. One contestant from a popular dating show once said that she would "stop her own BMW to get on the bicycle of her beloved," signaling self-sufficiency and a preference for romance over materialism (Farrer, 2002, as cited in Chen, 2017, p. 112). However, this stance remains rare. Her reference was a pointed response to an earlier contestant who infamously declared, "I'd rather cry in a BMW than smile on a bicycle" (Osnos, 2014, p. 43). While criticized for being a "gold digger" (Chen, 2017, p. 112), the latter woman voiced a widely shared, albeit less publicly stated, attitude among many Chinese women.

Many young women on the dating market noted that the available men were of notably lower quality than women of the same social bracket. One woman I interviewed, a graduate student in her mid-twenties and actively seeking a boyfriend, expressed frustration that most of the men she met did not meet her standards. She compared them to her female peers, saying, "The quality of the boys almost is not as good as, of course, the women. So I'm a little worried about my future boyfriend." Her use of "of course" revealed a common sentiment among highly-educated, career-oriented women that women among their generation are superior to their male peers in terms of "quality" (More from this interlocutor, Lily, in the case study below). Lake (2018) discusses this perceived mismatch, quoting an elderly father searching for a husband for his accomplished daughter:

> *"Finding a Chinese spouse can be even more challenging for so-called "leftover women", [because] they often have precisely what the shengnan [("leftover man")] lack: money, education and social and professional standing"*[222]

While many high-achieving women do not exclusively seek financial stability in a partner, as many are financially independent, most do expect compatibility in terms of values, education, and ambition. In the next section, we will explore the specific traits that many high-achieving single women prioritize when evaluating potential partners.

Three Highs

A popular expression that encapsulates the top three desirable traits of a potential husband is known as "the three highs." The phrase has multiple interpretations. According to Jean-Baptiste Pettier (2020), the three highs refer to "high education, high wage, high age," suggesting advanced degrees, higher salaries, and greater maturity[223] are ideal qualities sought in potential grooms (p. 5; also see Gui 2016). Some sources,[224] including interlocutors from my own research, have swapped out the potentially negative feature of "high age" for "height", as being tall was frequently mentioned by my female singletons as an important trait.

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[221] 裸婚 (luǒhūn) - literally "naked marriage," a wedding without the traditional material prerequisites such as a house , car, or bride price

[222] Larmer B. (2013 Mar 19), New York Times (as cited in Lake 2018: Preface)

[223] Being older isn't necessarily a desired feature, but more often a consequence of the time it takes to pursue the first two.

[224] (Rauhala, 2018)

Height

While the relative attractiveness of one's face was important in men's selection of women, women in my study did not seem to care about men being handsome. One woman in her mid-twenties, I spoke with, admitted that a handsome man "would be nice, average is better. Just not fat or short. That would make me uncomfortable. I just want a common man." To her, "common" was synonymous with tall. When I pressed her on why "average is better," she seemed to believe that she would have "less worry than if he were TOO handsome." I interpreted this as a concern about competition with other women. If her partner were too attractive, he might attract more attention from other women and therefore be more likely (able) to engage in an affair.

Many of the fliers in the park mention specific height requirements for a potential partner. One flier I saw at a market in Wuhan (Figure 79) posted by a 32-year-old woman, listed the following:

Figure 79. Photo of a woman's flier from a marriage market. Photo by author.

> ***Figure 79:*** *Born in 1991, 1.63 meters tall, weighing 96 kilograms, attained a Master's degree in France, now working in a reputable Internet education company in Wuhan. Annual salary of 150,000 RMB, elegant and beautiful. Party*

member. Native to Hubei. Lively and cheerful, kind, gentle, sensible, filial, and loves life. [telephone number].

Looking for a man in the age range of 5 years older to 3 years younger than me. About 178 cm tall, has a stable job, a wedding house, is cheerful, reasonable, can take care of his family, loves life, and has no bad habits, has an annual salary of more than 150,000 RMB and a bachelor's degree or above.

The woman lists that while she is 1.63 meters (5'4") tall, she requires that the man be at least 178 cm (5'10"). This is not unlike the trend among women in the United States, where a six-foot cutoff has fueled widespread discourse about men lying about their height.[225] According to a report by *China News,*[226] the average man in China is only 169.7cm (5'7"), meaning that such standards eliminate the majority of potential partners. Around the world, many women set criteria that only a fraction of men can meet. Fortunately, height is just one of the qualities women consider.

High Education

Education is another common criterion listed by women both in my interviews and published on fliers at the marriage markets, although the level of education does not always need to be above that of the women. As the flier from Figure 79 shows, the woman holds a Master's degree but only requires a Bachelor's degree for a mate. Because education is often associated with earning potential, this may suggest the woman recognizes her financial success. She earns well above the average wage for Wuhan. In this case, her income is sufficient to support herself and potentially a lower-earning partner. Alternatively, she may recognize that insisting on a partner with higher education would quickly evaporate an already small pool of eligible men.

However, educational attainment plays out unevenly for men and women in the dating market. While men with Master's degrees or higher are highly sought after, women with doctoral degrees are often seen as undesirable. A joke that was repeatedly told to me during my fieldwork[227] captures this bias: "Did you know that there are three genders in China? Men, women, and women with a PhD."[228] This joke only applied to women with doctoral degrees and illustrates how advanced education disqualifies such women from normative femininity, equating them to a third gender category closer to masculinity.

There are three reasons that a PhD differentiates women from unmarked women. First, the time it takes to complete a doctorate often places women on the dating market closer to the age of thirty, which, as discussed, is widely perceived as the cutoff for ideal marriageability. Second, the men I interviewed conveyed a common fear that a high-achieving woman would not want to take a break from her career to have children, which, as mentioned above, is the top priority of men when

[225] Example: Hancock, J. T., Ellison, N. B., & Toma, C. L. (2014). Separating fact from fiction: An examination of deceptive self-presentation in online dating profiles. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 40(9), 1023–1036. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167214535818

[226] China News Network. (2020 Dec 23). The average height of Chinese men and women is 169.7 cm and 158 cm, respectively. *China News*. https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2020/12-23/9369166.shtml

[227] This joke was often told to me when I revealed the research was conducting for a PhD

[228] 第三性 (dìsān xìng) - literally "third gender" but used an a derogatory phrase to describe women with PhDs

looking for a potential partner. Third, deeply-rooted hypergamous norms dictate that women should marry up to a man with higher status and earning power, while men marry down to socially inferior women. Thus, highly educated women, by this logic, shrink the pool of eligible men as very few men would be considered socially or professionally above them.

The real-world consequences of this double standard are stark. While men are encouraged to pursue higher education to increase their value on the marriage market, women are often punished for doing the same. Lake (2018) shares a story of a father who forbade his youngest daughter from pursuing graduate studies after witnessing how his eldest daughter's academic success was repeatedly rejected by suitors. "No man will want to marry you," he warned his youngest daughter (Chapter 2). Years later, the youngest had married and started a family, while the oldest daughter was still single.

Such cases of bias toward high-achieving women reflect a broader structural inequality. In contemporary China, education enhances men's desirability while diminishing women's, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies under the guise of rational choice. While some women may choose to forgo advanced degrees to appear more marriageable, they mostly prefer men with a master's degree or higher.

High Salary

Returning to the *China Daily* infographic (Figure 77), a man's earning potential is the most valued trait among Chinese women seeking a husband. Wealth, whether generational or self-made, is often demonstrated in three ways: salary, assets, or financial gifts. All three were commonly discussed by my interlocutors.

Salary was the most direct indicator of a man's financial stability. In the United States, discussing salary in a romantic context is often considered taboo, as money is idealized as something that should not influence love. In China, however, a man's salary is a public detail and is often one of the first things shared when entering the dating market. Most matchmaking fliers include a man's income, and women frequently list salary expectations in their own advertisements. Again, returning to the example of the flier from Figure 78, the woman reveals her salary as 150,000 RMB ($21,000 USD) per year, and requires her partner to make (at least) the same.

Assets offer another way for a man to signal that he is financially successful. The two most common assets listed in matchmaking marketing are property and cars.[229] These are considered necessary items for starting a family and maintaining a respectable lifestyle. Compare the two fliers from Figure 80 and Figure 81.

[229] On the dating apps, men would often include at least one picture of their car, or them driving in their car (see Figure 61). Men told me that it was common to rent luxury cars specifically for this picture.

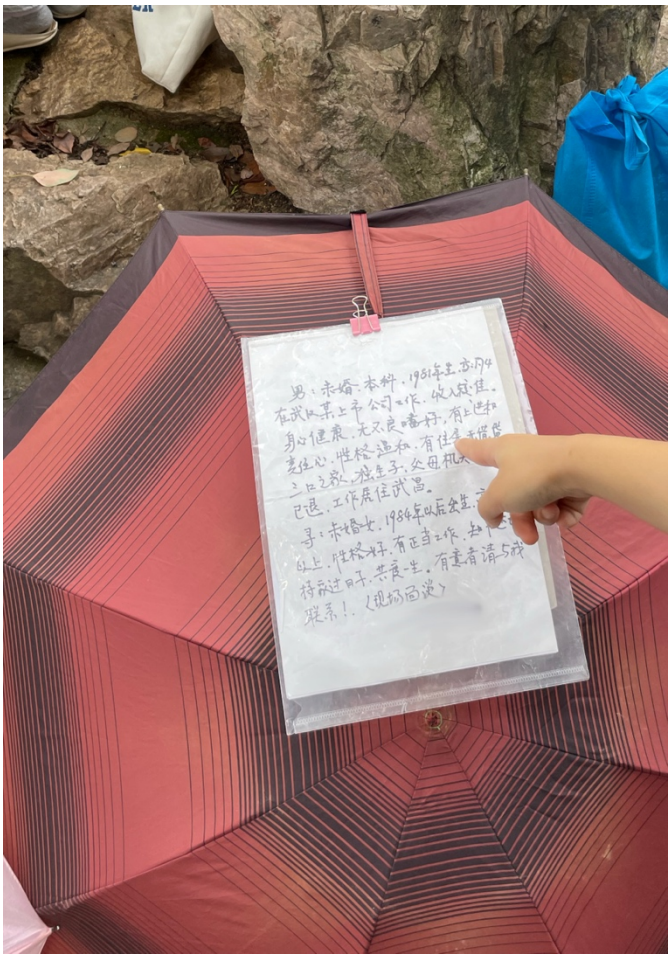

Figure 80. Photo of a man's hand-written flier from a marriage market. Photo by author.

Figure 80: *Male. Unmarried. Bachelor's degree. Born in 1981. 1.74m tall. Works in a reputable company in Wuyi as of April 4 with good income. Physically and mentally healthy. No bad habits. Motivated and Responsible. Gentle personality. A family of three. Has housing. No loans. Only child. My parents are old and retired. Living and working in Wuchang.*

Looking for unmarried women born after 1984. North of Guangdong province. Good personality. Decent job. Knows how to manage a household. Spend the rest of your life with me. If you are interested please contact me. "I am bored by this scene"
[phone number]

This 42-year-old man does not list his income directly and only refers to it as "good", likely attempting to mask his low financial status. The other indicator of his lower SES is the lack of a mention of a vehicle. While he does list a home, one could venture to say that he is not as well off as most women require. He also does not mention his position at the construction/engineering

company, which further suggests his lack of social capital in the dating market. Compare this to another flier:

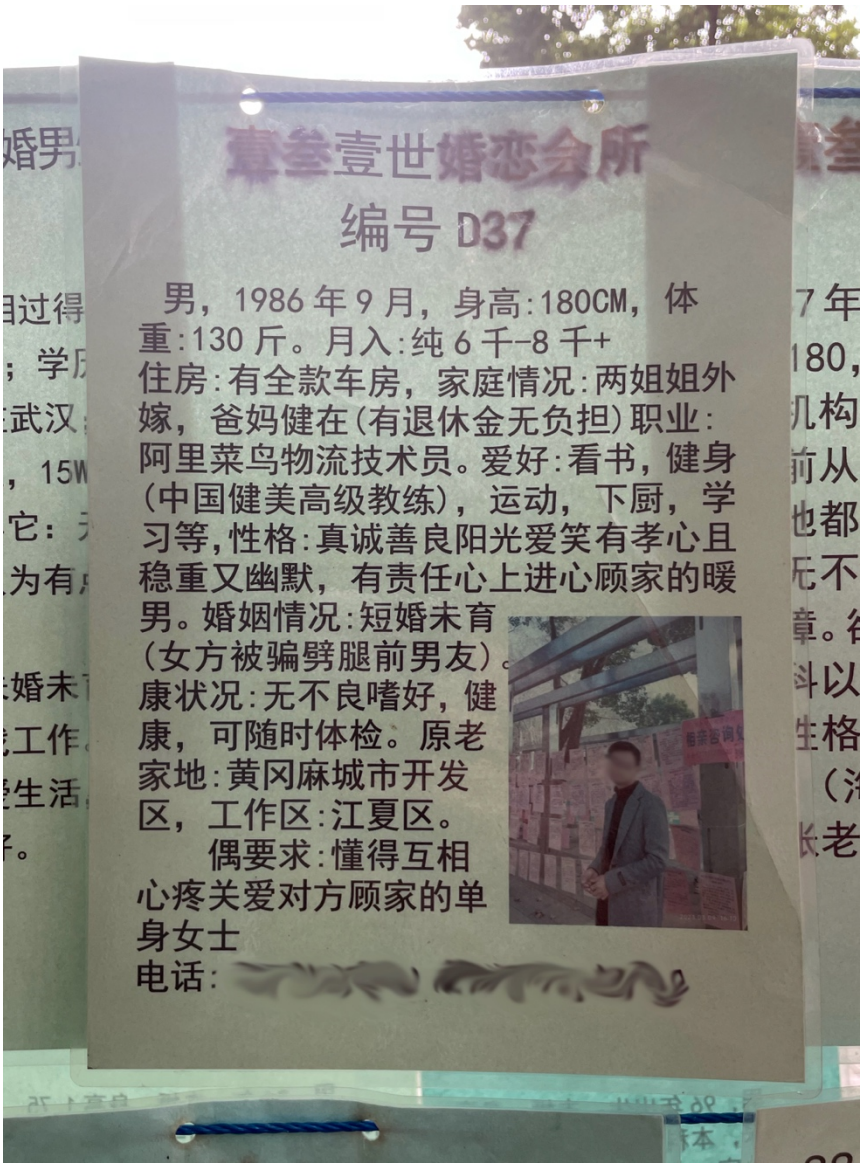

Figure 81. Example of a man's printed flier from a marriage market. Photo by author.

Figure 81: *Male. Born Sept 1986. Height: 180cm. Weight: 130kg. Monthly income 6,000-8,000+ RMB. Assets: Fully paid car and house. Family: two sisters (married), parents are still alive (with pension, no burden). Occupation: Ali Cainiao Logistics Technician. Hobbies: reading, fitness (China bodybuilding senior coach), sports, cooking, learning, etc. Personality: sincere, kind, sunny, smiling, filial, steady, humorous, responsible, motivated, family oriented, warm hearted. Marital Status: married briefly, no children (the woman was deceitful and cheated on me with her ex-boyfriend). Health status: no bad habits, healthy*

(willing to have a physical exam). Hometown: Huanggang Macheng. Work Location: Jiangxia.

My requirements: Single ladies who know how to care for people and their families. [Telephone Number].

This flier was posted by a 37-year-old man who openly lists his assets and job title. Employed as a technician, he reports earning between 6,000-8,000 RMB per month ($10-12k[230] annually), well above a livable wage in Wuhan. Unlike the man from Figure 80, he lists his salary directly, suggesting that he is either confident in the amount or aware that transparency increases his appeal.

Besides salary, men will signal their wealth by listing assets. The man from this flier emphasizes his financial stability by listing the status of his assets. He notes that his house and car are paid off and that his parents receive pensions, which he frames as "no burden." He also states that his two sisters are married, signaling that he is not financially responsible for them; per the norms of the traditionally patrilineal expectations, they are now under the responsibility of their husbands' families.

However, some aspects of his background may be perceived as liabilities. The presence of two sisters and his birth in 1986 suggests that he may have been the product of a son preference under China's restrictive family planning policies, which some women view critically. As seen in June's case study below, women may disapprove of families that prioritize sons at the expense of obeying laws. His status as a divorce is another potential red flag. Several women I interviewed said they would question the man's role in the failed marriage asking, "What did he do to make his wife leave?" Although the flier uses its limited space to attribute the separation to his ex-wife's infidelity, this attempt to clear his name may unintentionally suggest a tendency to deflect blame or an inclination toward bitterness.

For younger men, achieving this level of salary and employment is out of reach. For poorer men, acquiring property is nearly impossible without substantial family support. In *Leftover in China,* Lake (2018) estimates that the average man in Beijing or Shanghai would need "approximately twenty-eight times his starting yearly salary" to afford even a modest single-bedroom apartment and a car (p. 138). The extreme financial pressure for men to obtain such assets before entering the dating market has given rise to the term *fangnu*,[231] or "house slave," referring to men who must devote a majority of their income to mortgage payments.

Some men I interviewed, such as Jiang, paid over half of their monthly salary to their car and housing payments. For men fortunate to come from wealthier families, it is not uncommon for their parents to aid in these costs. As the third child of poor farmers, Jiang receives no support from his family and shoulders the costs alone. Despite his impressive two-bedroom apartment in the city limits of Wuhan, one of the two rooms remains nearly empty, only collecting dust on a

[230] A single person's cost of living is approximately $6,000 USD/year in Wuhan according to: https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/in/Wuhan

[231] 房奴(fángnú) - literally "house slave", but maybe better translated as "mortgage slave"

couple of empty boxes from recent large purchases. When I visited his home, Jiang admitted that he rarely opened the door to the bonus room and that the extra space served no practical function for him but was meant to appeal to a future wife.

Single men using square footage to entice brides has become ubiquitous in the dating market. The phenomenon echoes what Lake (2018) calls the "phantom third stories" of bachelor homes in rural areas. These two-story homes will often have "an unfinished, unfurnished third story built expressly to make the house appear more grandiose from the outside" (p. 16). In urban areas, apartments like Jiang's are more likely to include what I call "phantom rooms," empty spaces signaling to women that there is space for future children.

Another way men can signal their wealth is through a financial gift to the bride's family before marriage. Although not listed on fliers as an asset, the *caili*[232] or "bride price," are often discussed in early conversation within the dating market. I have heard mothers share how much they are willing to pay, or how much they expect for the *caili.* This practice is a hangover of a tradition practiced during the era of arranged marriages; *caili* has been reinterpreted in the modern context. According to several marriage market participants I interviewed, the exchange is no longer viewed as "purchasing" a bride, but now functions as a formal promise to marry and demonstration of a man's capacity to provide, not unlike an engagement ring within our own society.

When I asked what typically happens to the *caili*, most respondents said the bride's parents give the money back to their daughter as a safety net in case the marriage fails. One father told me he used the funds to help cover wedding expenses. Another told me he used part of it to help his son, the bride's younger brother, invest in a home, thereby continuing and reinforcing the gendered pattern where men are expected to peacock to secure a bride. Regardless of how the money is used, the gift remains a significant marker of a man's ability to support his future wife.

"Location Is Everything"

One major difference between my data and the existing literature on what women most value in a partner is the importance of location. Most of the women that I spoke with identified a man's hometown as the first factor of elimination. Although *hukou* has been addressed in previous research (Hu, 2024; Xu, 2019; Zhou, 2019), the specific location of a man's family's home, particularly where his parents currently reside, appeared to hold significant weight in women's decision-making process.

Historically, the Chinese household registration law allows women to obtain the *hukou* of their husbands, but not the reverse (Hu, 2024). Updated marriage laws allow men to obtain their wife's *hukou*, but is "tightly regulated" by local authorities (Han et al., 2025, p. 1864). In practical terms, this means that it is more common for a woman from a rural area to become a legal resident of an urban area, gaining access to the social services of that area through marriage, than for rural men marrying urban women. The bride's future children would also benefit from those services, such as increased potential of enrollment in local universities (Han et al, 2025; Hu, 2024). For this reason, women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may view marriage as a pathway to upward mobility. For example, I met one mother at a Shanghai marriage market who was from

[232] 彩礼 (cǎilǐ) - "bride price"

Anhui, a nearby and comparably poorer province. The mother lived in Shanghai with a daughter, both retaining their Anhui *hukous.* The mother's primary goal was to secure a marriage between her daughter and a man with a Shanghai *hukou,* which would allow her daughter to remain in the city without relying solely on employment.

While some women do indeed use marriage as a strategy to obtain urban *hukous*, my research found that women from middle to upper-class backgrounds typically preferred men from the same natal regions. One interviewee, a 26-year-old graduate student called Lina explained to me, "Location is everything. As long as they can be close to their own hometown, they don't care where their partner is from." When asked why proximity to one's hometown was so critical, she offered two explanations. First, she emphasized the importance of being near one's parents: "Especially for only children like me, it's important to be close to your parents as they age. If you live many provinces away and they get sick, you cannot take care of them." In the context of China's OCP, the responsibility to perform filial piety often falls entirely on a single child. Without siblings to share the burden of elder care, proximity to parents becomes a practical and emotional necessity. The second reason Lina provided was that regional temperaments and cultural norms vary so widely that most people prefer to marry someone whose behavior and values are familiar to them. In her view, people from the same general area are more likely to understand one another's expectations and habits, leading to smoother relationships.

As the case studies at the end of this chapter will demonstrate, a man's location matters just as much as height, education and wealth when it comes to what women look for in a potential husband. Before turning to those individual case studies, however, the next section will explore a different pattern, the reasons why many women actively avoid marriage, including their fear and distrust of men.

Fear: Why Chinese Women Are Afraid of Chinese Men

A recurring theme that emerged in my interviews with women was fear of men and marriage. As discussed in Chapter 2, Xiaoyuan's anxiety about being kidnapped and forced into sexual servitude reflects how sensational media narratives, both real (such as the *Chained Woman* case), and fictionalized (as depicted in the film *Blind Mountain*), shape public consciousness. Given the broader cultural messaging that frames men as violent and entitled to women's bodies, it is no surprise that many women express deep ambivalence and absolute reluctance toward marriage. While Chapter 2 examined the origins and circulation of such messaging, this section turns to the concrete anxieties these narratives produce. Across my fieldwork, three particular fears echoed during my twenty-six interviews with women of marriageable-age: (1) the fear of being disempowered within the relationship with their future MIL, (2) the fear of physical abuse from their future husband, and (3) a fear of men's everyday misogyny, or what is commonly called *zhunanai* or "straight man cancer." Each of these fears mirrors the structural and interpersonal challenges that the women anticipate encountering within the context of heterosexual marriage, thus making the institution deeply unappealing.

Mother-in-Law

One of the most frequently cited fears about marriage was the potential to have an evil mother-in-law (MIL). While this dynamic is often strained in many cultures, it is widely perceived to be especially fraught within Chinese families (Cai & Hou, 2025, p. 375). This intensification is closely tied to structural factors of Chinese kinship. Renowned Chinese Anthropologist, Fei Xiaotong, explains that whereas in Western families tend to center the husband/wife bond with their in-laws, forming a peripheral "horizontal" ties, Chinese families organize kinship based on "vertical" hierarchies (1992 as cited in Gui, 2016, p. 1928). These relationships are stratified along the lines of both gender and generation, such as father/son and mother/daughter-in-law (DIL), decentering the conjugal relationship altogether. Because of this standard, women often give much consideration to this dynamic in their partner selection as we will see in the case studies later in this chapter.

This structural orientation makes the MIL/DIL dynamic especially consequential. Many of the women I interviewed were well aware of the power their future MIL could potentially hold over their house and marital satisfaction. Therefore, many of my interlocutors included assessing the character, values, and background of the potential MIL just as important as the potential husband himself. One woman noted that while you may have the same views with your husbands, "it doesn't matter… you're still going to live with your MIL one day."

Although multi-generational households have become less common, where less than half of newlyweds live with their parents (Osnos, 2014, p. 56), certain traditional kinship expectations persist. Eldest sons are still viewed as responsible for caring for their aging parents (Whyte, 2004), and so many women I interviewed anticipate that they will eventually share a home with their in-laws. This concern has been magnified by the OCP's legacy. Many of the men in the current dating pool are only children, meaning that they are likely the sole providers of their parents' physical and emotional care. This second part has proven problematic in the context of marriage as it causes the mother and DIL to compete for the man's affection. Cai and Hou (2025) found in their study of dual-only-child marriages that persistent conflict regarding split attention between the two women resulted in the couples divorcing (p. 381).

Research also suggests that both women's bargaining power within the household is largely shaped by their educational and occupational status. Women considered more "successful" in these two arenas are less likely to live with their in-laws (Zhang, 2015). Yet, ironically, these same women are also more likely to depend on their in-laws for child care once they do become mothers, due to job demands and the high price of childcare in most urban areas (Chai & Hou, 2025, p. 376). That said, the reverse is also risky, as higher achieving MIL have been shown to result in increased domestic conflict (Husain et al., 2023, as cited in Chai & Hou, 2024, p. 376), likely due to competing claims of authority. These findings corroborate many of my interviews where women have told me that they are both examining compatibility with a potential husband, and their relative social standing to their mothers.

Some elderly mothers are aware of their role as a deterrent to their son's marital success. In Shanghai, I spoke with a retired widow who was seeking a wife for her only adult son. She admitted that the biggest barrier to securing a match was the fact that any future wife would be expected to live with her for the rest of her (the MIL's) life. As a retiree in one of China's most expensive cities, she could not afford her own apartment and relied on her son's income to survive. In

contrast, more affluent mothers can assist their sons in attracting partners by participating in what has been dubbed "mother-in-law syndrome". This form of competitive real estate purchasing is led by mothers helping their only sons by investing in larger homes specifically to increase their competitive edge on the dating market (Osnos, 2014, p. 56). Even for those who can afford the wife-trap housing, the chance of the two women eventually sharing a roof is not zero.

The absence of a MIL can be just as concerning as her presence. One man I interviewed in Chongqing linked his inability to find a wife to his mother's death, believing that as an only son with a widower father, he was less appealing to prospective brides. When I asked several of my female interlocutors how they would feel about NOT having a MIL, they explained that it would be a disadvantage and likely mean more work for them in the future. Without a MIL to help with childcare, a new mother would have to shoulder that burden alone, while also taking on the responsibility of elder care for her FIL as he ages. This reasoning underscores the central role of the MIL/DIL relationship in Chinese family life and how it shapes perceptions of a "good match" (also see Lin et al., 2021), while simultaneously being a source of anxiety.

In short, women's fears about marriage are often compounded by multiple factors, one of which is the household power-dynamics they anticipate inheriting. The enduring influence of MIL, combined with cultural expectations around filial piety and elder care, created a situation in which many women feel that marriage would mean losing their autonomy from their potential husband and their future MIL. As June's case study below illustrates, the temperament of a future MIL frequently plays a significant role in a woman's decisions about whether or not to proceed with a marriage.

Domestic Violence

Another often cited fear of marriage is the potential to become trapped in a relationship with an abusive husband. While Huamei's harrowing experience of a decades-long sexual and physical torture, as detailed in Chapter 2: *The Chained Woman*, is extreme, less visible forms of domestic violence occur regularly across China. Although the Chinese have been acknowledging intimate partner violence since the 1930s, Cecilia Milwertz (2003) argues that its prevalence is tied to shifting geopolitical conditions, thereby influencing the fluctuation in women's relative subordinate social status (to men) across different historical periods (p. 630). She notes that before 2001, domestic violence was not even mentioned in the Chinese marriage law (p. 635). The absence of legal recognition allowed generations of marital abuse to go unreported and normalized violence within marriage (p. 637). Women across these generations internalize the behaviors as they both witnessed and shared their experience with one another, shaping expectations that abuse is an unfortunate but accepted part of marriage. These learned expectations contribute to younger women's growing apprehension about becoming a wife.

Leta Hong Fincher (2014) expands on these concerns in her book *Leftover Women: The resurgence of gender inequality in China*. She argues that the rise in domestic violence has increased alongside women's social subordination since China's Reform Era of the 1980s (Chapter 5). She cites studies estimating that one in every four Chinese women has experienced "intimate partner violence" (p. 170). Despite its pervasiveness, most women do not recognize this treatment as "abuse". Fincher describes a study where women commonly deny having "experienced domestic violence", but

admit to being hit (ibid). Such a disconnect between the action of hitting and abuse suggests the normalization of certain types of interactions, where physical abuse is not perceived as "violent" unless extreme.

One possible explanation for the normalization and under reporting of spousal abuse is to protect the husband to "save face." Fincher (2014) discusses the sentiment of preserving one's social standing by avoiding public humiliation within a larger network of familial relationships, with the expression that they need to prevent "exposing family ugliness"[233] (p. 208-218). Women are often pressured by their families, particularly in-laws, to endure violence silently to protect the family's reputation (p. 210). Fincher recounts a case in which an interlocutor's sister-in-law told her, "It's nothing. All men are like that" (p. 220). Such statements reflect how domestic violence is sustained through interpersonal pressure as well as structural neglect. These conditions reinforce women's belief that violence is an inevitable part of marriage, heightening their reluctance to marry.

In 2013, while living in Beijing, I encountered firsthand the social and legal limitations surrounding domestic abuse. My shared apartment was located directly above a married couple whose violent arguments were loud and frequent. Though I never witnessed the abuse with my eyes, the yelling, hitting, and throwing of items was audible through my floorboards. The wife was regularly seen with a black eye. The first time I heard them, I asked my Chinese housemate, Xiaomi, what we should do and whom to call. Xiaomi told me that she had stopped calling the police because the woman never pressed charges and consistently denied the abuse. She explained how widespread the behavior was and even cited it as a reason for her not marrying a mainland Chinese man.[234]

At the time, in my twenties, I naively dismissed the situation as a "cultural difference" that I had no right to interfere with. I have since come to understand the difference between cultural relativism versus moral relativism. While cultural norms and historical legal inadequacies have shaped the social acceptance of domestic violence in China, that context does not absolve perpetrators and bystanders of ethical responsibility. Even a small act, like knocking on the door to let the husband know his violence was audible to neighbors, might have disrupted the power dynamic and caused him to lose face within his immediate community. While this may not have stopped the abuse, it may have offered the wife a momentary reprieve and signaled that someone saw her and cared.

Instead, I remained silent, rationalizing my inaction through the lens of cultural difference. My silence, much like the sister-in-law's dismissive remark in Fincher's research, reinforced the normalization of violence. In doing nothing, I unintentionally mirrored the same dynamics that many women fear when contemplating marriage, where women inevitably lack protection, lack recourse, and must endure broader social silence that condones women's suffering.

Today, China's legal system continues to offer limited protection against gender-based violence, further reinforcing women's fears of men and the institution of marriage. Marital rape is still not criminalized, and broader sexual violence laws are rarely enforced (Fincher, 2014, p. 167). A

[233] 家丑外扬 (jiāchǒu wàiyáng) - "exposing family ugliness". Chinese equivalent to the English idiom: "airing out dirty laundry in public"

[234] She is married to a Chinese-American man.

United Nations study found that one in two Chinese men "had used physical or sexual violence against an intimate partner" and only a quarter of Chinese men who had perpetuated rape outside of marriage suffered any sort of consequences (p. 169). Fincher notes that men often believe they have the right to sex (p. 170), which blurs the lines between intimacy and coercion. This sense of entitlement is both frightening and legitimized by state inaction and social norms, leading young women like Xiaoyuan (see Chapter 2) to think of men not as potential romantic partners but as potential threats. Feared and entitled, men's attitude reflects a general chauvinist ideology that positions women below men in the social hierarchy, and diminishes both their agency and desire to marry.

Zhunanai: Straight Man Cancer

Ultimately, what many of the women I interviewed feared most was misogyny. The rise of feminist discourse in Chinese digital space[235] has given progressive-leaning women new channels to share ideas and experiences. One term that has gained popularity in the past decade is *zhunanai*[236] or "straight man cancer", the Chinese equivalent of "male chauvinist pig" in English (Wu, 2020, p. 182). According to sinologist, Geng Song (2022) the term plays on a pun with *zhichangai*[237] meaning "rectal cancer," both implying that the condition is incurable (p. 73), as well as, at least in my interpretation, associating the men metaphorically to "assholes". Song describes this type of man as "cynical, chauvinist, and prone to sexist behavior and language … prejudiced against women and, out of deep-seated male anxiety, typically confirms his own worth by belittling women, especially women who are superior to him in education, family background, or professional achievement" (p. 73). The central concern for many of the women that I spoke with seemed to be the possibility of becoming trapped in a marriage with a man who sees them as baby-making machines to fulfill the man's own filial duty of becoming a father, rather than as the women being full individuals deserving of respect and support of their own dreams.

The term *zhunanai* is often used by younger, unmarried women online to critique public discourse, including media that glorifies female self-sacrifice and reinforces traditional gender hierarchies. One television drama from 2018, *Mother's Life,* received strong praise from older female viewers but faced much backlash among women under thirty (Song, 2022, p. 99).[238] The show centers a woman who marries into a wealthier family and sacrifices her health and autonomy for her children, especially her only son, and her in-laws, even after the death of her husband. Song (2022) argues that the show romanticizes "feudal" values by its treatment of "women as machines for reproduction" (p. 96) and glorifies maternal martyrdom. A promotional poster (Figure 82) reads "women are by nature weak, but they are incredibly strong when they become a mother" (p. 97), reinforcing the idea that women's strength is defined by their self-sacrifice and suffering for their family. Song connects such narratives to what he calls "victimhood nationalism" (p. 96), which the author insists is "intertwined with deep-rooted anxiety over national power and virility" (ibid).

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[235] See Huang, N. (2016 Dec 20) Why the 'Straight Man Cancer' Label Is a Waste of Time. *Sixth Tone.* https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1705

[236] 直男癌 (*zhínán ái)* - straight man cancer

[237] 直肠癌 (*zhícháng ái*) - rectal cancer

[238] One comment on an online forum that highlighted the differences in generations was from a young woman: "My parents are watching *Mother's Life* in the sitting room, while I am watching *A Handmaid's Tale* in my bedroom—between us is the longest distance in the world!" (Q. Wang 2018). (Song, 2022, p. 96)

For many young women, *zhunanai* encapsulates their fear of being trapped in marriages with husbands that embody these chauvinistic ideals that reduce women to reproductive labor made to serve the men throughout their lives.

Figure 82. *Promotional poster for a TV show that contains Straight Male Cancer Ideology.* Mother's Life *(2018) includes the plotline in the upper left-hand corner, which reads: "women are by nature weak, but they are incredibly strong when they become a mother" (Song, 2022, p. 97)*

Another target of online feminist critique is the youth icon, blogger, and film director Han Han, known for his regressive views on gender. According to gendered language scholar Xiaoping Wu (2020), Han Han has repeatedly expressed views that align with *zhunanai* ideology. In one blog post, he remarked "that he would not allow his girlfriend to work outside the household" (p. 182). Already labelled a chauvinist by many feminists, Han later posted a song titled "The Manifesto of a Real Man"[239] to promote his new film (p. 188). The theme song to his upcoming film included

[239] 男子汉宣言 (nanzihan xuanyan) "The Manifesto of a Real Man". The song is an adaptation of a Japanese wedding song with the Chinese lyrics composed by director Han Han which he used to promote a new film (Wu 2020: 187).

lyrics outlining the sexist expectations of a groom to his new wife, which emphasized female subservience, along with the emotional and physical labor demanded of a wife (p. 191):

> *You can't go to bed earlier than me*
> *You are not allowed to rise later than me*
> *You should make tasty food, dress up appropriately. I have no ability*
> *This family all depends on you*
> *Only you can do things well*
> *Don't count on me*
> *I'm ordinary*
> *It is my greatest blessing to marry you. You raise our children*
> *When we get old, you should not die before me*
> *On my deathbed, please hold my hand.*

In response, feminists called for a boycott of the film (Wu, 2020, p. 188). The song both romanticizes male incompetence and the normalization of women enduring life-long sacrifice in the name of love and duty. Such messaging reflects the persistence of Confucian patriarchal ideology, in which a woman's value is tied to her selflessness and service to her husband, his family, and her children.

Such messaging from blog posts from celebrities and popular television shows contributes to the growing fear among young women about what marriage entails. As more women gain access to higher education, careers, and financial independence, they are less eager to enter relationships that demand labor without reciprocity. The fear is not of individual men, but the cancerous ideologies that continue to spread, pressuring women to surrender their newfound autonomy for cultural stability. The mismatch between women's evolving aspirations and desires and the stagnation of social expectations as represented in public increases women's fear of men and distrust of the institutions of marriage, as we will see depicted in the case studies below.

Case Studies of Five Women's Relationship to Men and Marriage

The following case studies detail the lives of five women navigating China's changing marital landscape: two pairs with different relationships to marriage, and one queer outlier forging her own path. The first duo are sisters, a 34-year-old *shengnu*, still searching for a partner, and her 22-year-old sister, whose accounts highlight how the elder's struggles have shaped her own views on men and dating. The second pair, though not related, shares a similar age gap. I introduced the two during fieldwork, and their conversations echoed the generational influence seen in the two sisters. In both cases, the younger women are deeply affected by the experiences and advice of their elders. The final case is a lesbian who would welcome the opportunity to marry, but has no interest in marrying a man. Collectively, these five women represent a range of experiences among marital-aged women in China. By examining what they seek, what they fear, and how they navigate romance, we gain insight into how women's growing agency is reshaping the landscape of desirable masculinity.

June: A Classic Shengnu (Leftover Woman)

姓名 Name	June
性别 Sex	Female
婚姻状况 Marital Status	Single
年龄 Age	33 (Born 1990)
高度 Height	161 cm (5'5")
重量 Weight	kg (160lbs)
教育 Education	BA and MA in Business
职业 Occupation	Business Trader
资产 Assets	Car
老家 Hometown	Qingdao, Shandong Province
家庭 Family	Family of 4, eldest of 2 sisters.
寻求 Looking for	A husband from Qingdao. Only child. From a kind family. Financially independent. Willing to split costs evenly.

While conducting research, I hired a 22-year-old graduate student named Lily to help me improve my conversational Chinese and to help interpret nuance in my data. Over time, we developed a rapport, and I came to learn about her life and family. Lily was studying translation in Wuhan, but originated from Qingdao[240] and was the second daughter of her parents. Her elder sister, June, was eleven years older and still lived at home with her parents and remained unmarried in her mid-thirties.

Lily spoke of her sister with great affection. While I never met June, I developed the impression that she was a quintessential *shengnu*, "leftover woman," as she was high-achieving and still unmarried past thirty years old. According to Lily, her sister worked as a trader and had prioritized her career over dating throughout her twenties. By the age of twenty-eight, their parents began expressing concern about June's singleness, but she felt satisfied with her financial independence. At thirty-two, however, she began to feel both familial and societal pressure to find a partner. Her shift from contentment to anxiety reflects the tensions between women's rising social status and the traditional expectations of marriage.

[240] A recently recognized as a first-tier city in *Shandong* Province

The pressure June faced was not just familial. Lily told me her sister had been passed over for a promotion at work because she was unmarried. Chen & Chan (2022) corroborated this phenomenon with one of their participants, who explained that "married women were preferred in promotions because their role as mothers testifies their multi-tasking and management abilities" (Chen & Chan, 2022, p. 42). Coming from a context where marital status discrimination is illegal, I found this difficult to comprehend. Lily was not able to provide further details and we both chalked my lack of understanding to cultural and legal differences, to which I lacked nuance. Still, her comment points to how single women face not only social stigma but also economic disadvantages in China's highly-gendered workplace. June's experience of workplace discrimination highlights how Chinese women's decisions to marry (or not), though seemingly personal, are shaped by broader systemic pressures.

Privately, I began to wonder whether June's singleness might be related to her sexual orientation. In previous interviews, I had encountered queer women who had used career ambition as a socially acceptable way to evade heterosexual relationships (See Ru's case study below). Curious, I asked to see a photo of the sister, hoping for subtle clues to my query. Lily showed me several pictures of the two of them throughout the years. Although I am aware that queerness cannot be detected solely on appearance, nothing about June appeared queer-coded. She appeared remarkably conventional, plain even, and a bit heavier than most Chinese women. She was likely considered *pang,*[241] or "fat," to the average Chinese eye, a quality that would make her unpopular on the marriage market. Though Lily and I never discussed it, I assumed that June's overall appearance likely contributed to her difficulty finding a partner. If true, this would suggest that despite women having social capital in terms of education and financial positioning, beauty norms still restrict women's success in romantic choice.

When I inquired whether June had ever had a significant relationship, Lily explained that she had her first boyfriend last year at thirty-three. The relationship only lasted a few months. Although the man lived in Qingdao, he was from Dongbei (Northeastern China), and cultural differences quickly emerged as obstacles to their relationship. Lily repeated the phrase I had heard many times (including what Lina mentioned above): "location is everything," explaining that people from different regions have different temperaments. For this particular family, regional compatibility was just as important as class or education, which mirrors wider patterns in my data, where regional background functions as the first barrier to partner selection, as mentioned in the section above.

Aside from the geographic mismatch, the couple's financial expectations were also misaligned. June had worked hard to become financially independent and took pride in her autonomy. When her boyfriend revealed that he anticipated that June would contribute sixty-five percent of her earnings to their shared expenses, while he would only contribute thirty-five percent red flags were raised. Lily explained that finances equally was essential to her and her sister. The demand for such an imbalance triggered a deeper fear common among Chinese women. As mentioned in the *Fear* section above, economic dependence on men may lead to male dominance, which can then lead to a higher risk of abuse. June's hesitation reflects the broader anxiety that marriage may compromise rather than secure a woman's future.

[241] 胖的（*pàng de)* - fat

Another source of tension was the man's family. Like Jiang (from Chapter 4), June's boyfriend was the youngest of three children, but unlike Jiang, he was the only son. Lily noted that his family's structure made her family uneasy. In their view, families that keep having children until they produce a male heir reveal a disregard for both girls and state policy. "They wanted a son so badly they kept having more children until they had a boy…[therefore] we [our family] questioned his EQ[242] as well as his parents' morals," she explained, implying that such families likely harbor sexist values. Lily's statement reveals that judgment extended beyond the boyfriend to his family, particularly his mother, who was assumed to be domineering and unkind to her future DIL. The suspicions were affirmed when the two families met and, according to Lily, the would-be-future-MIL was disrespectful to both June and her mother. For June, the myth of the "evil mother-in-law" loomed large, demonstrating how fear of such intergenerational dynamics shapes women's decisions concerning marriage, as women hesitate to enter hierarchies where they lack protection, respect, and autonomy.

After the single engagement meeting, Lily's mother declared the relationship over. Her veto power highlights the active role parents, particularly mothers, play in shaping their daughters' marital outcomes. This example demonstrates how women's agency and, consequently men's marriageability is intertwined with parental authority and familial reputation.

Once the relationship ended, the girls' mother became even more determined to find June a husband. Though retired, she dedicated herself to full-time matchmaking (see Chapter 3), by passing local-park marriage markets in favor of newer communication hubs like *Douyin*. Rather than attending a synchronous event in-person, she advertised her daughter asynchronously, posting videos for potential suitors (and their parents). One such video (see Figure 57) mirrored an interaction that may happen at a marriage market, where the aging mother highlighted her daughter's best attributes, while also listing the items that one might find on a flier: age, job, education, etc. This shift to digital matchmaking reveals how parental involvement is evolving to the available technologies. Just as in the markets, the mother curated a selection of potential men to present to her busy daughter, without having to leave the comfort of her home.

Lily: Eligible Young Woman with High-Standards

姓名 Name	Lily
性别 Sex	Female
婚姻状况 Marital Status	Single
年龄 Age	22 (Born 2001)
高度 Height	164 cm (5'6")

[242] Emotional Quotient - a measure of emotional intelligence.

重量 Weight	59kg (130lbs)
教育 Education	BA working toward MA in Translation Studies
职业 Occupation	Full-time graduate student
资产 Assets	N/A
老家 Hometown	Qingdao, Shandong Province
家庭 Family	Family of 4, Youngest of 2 sisters.
寻求 Looking for	A boyfriend from Qingdao. Only child. From a kind family. No bad habits - NO SMOKERS!

Because June had waited so long to start seeking a partner and had so little success, her mother, increasingly anxious, has begun to shift her focus to Lily. At only twenty-two years old, a time when daughters are usually encouraged to focus on finishing their studies and securing a job, Lily is already being pressured to find a boyfriend. Lily recounted, “When I go home, my mother will say, ‘You should find a boyfriend! You are in the spotlight now at this age. You are not as young as before.” She explained that the spotlight here was meant to indicate her prime, when her marriageable value was at its peak. Their mother, fearing another unmarried daughter, encouraged Lily to marry within five years. Such urgency reflects both the anxiety that the parents of singletons experience as well as how many parents are using early intervention strategies to manage risk of having unmarried daughters.

When asked if she had an interest in dating, Lily admitted to feeling lonely but was unimpressed by the men she knew. She echoed the sentiment I had heard so many times before about girls being “too excellent.” However, Lily noted that her and her sister’s singleness is not simply due to a sense of self-worth, but also their father setting too high a standard. “He is a very tall, handsome, gentle man [who] does not show his anger,” she explained. In their minds, their father represented an ideal form of masculinity that expressed caring, composed, and respectful behavior. The expectation set by their father made it difficult for the girls to settle for less.

Taken together, Lily and June’s experiences are key themes in the Chinese singleness epidemic. Their ideal partners are both tall or rich, but also local, kind, and emotionally intelligent. At the same time, they feared domineering MIL, sexist family dynamics, and losing their hard-earned financial independence. Both of the girl's parents played roles in shaping their daughters' expectations. The father set the standard of male behavior while their mother acted as the social filter, screening out anyone unworthy of their daughter’s love. The family worked as a unit to vet potential suitors, and the daughters' high social achievements gave them more freedom to choose or reject marriage than generations past. While June may have lost social capital due to her age, her experience has shaped Lily's understanding of what is at stake in romantic decision-making and the type of masculinity that is worthy of marriage.

When I asked Lily whether she thought it was possible for her and June "to remain unmarried and still live good lives", her answer surprised me. "If you are from a big city, it is possible [to be happy and single]," she said, citing job opportunities and their related economic advantages. In her view, Qingdao afforded that possibility. "But," she added, "my mother cannot be [happy]," referring to the pressure older generations face when their children remain single. Her comment reveals that while singlehood may be acceptable for individuals, it remains emotionally and socially intolerable for parents. In the end, Lily and June are not just choosing whether or not to marry for themselves but must negotiate the desires and disappointment of their parents.

Laura: Young Woman - Eligible but Very Uninterested

姓名 Name	Laura
性别 Sex	Female
婚姻状况 Marital Status	Dating
年龄 Age	24 (Born 1999)
高度 Height	178 cm (5'10")
重量 Weight	54kg (120lbs)
教育 Education	BA and working toward MA in English Translation
职业 Occupation	Full-time graduate student
资产 Assets	N/A
老家 Hometown	Rural Village near Linyi, Shandong Province
家庭 Family	Family of 6, Eldest of 4 children. Three girls and a boy.
寻求 Looking for	Not Looking for Marriage. Seeking a stable career that allows her to be self-sufficient.

I met another woman, Laura, around Lily's age, in Chongqing. At 24, she was also attending graduate school, and studying at a coffee shop when we met.

Laura was originally from a rural village in Shandong province, with a population of fewer than 1000 people. She was the eldest daughter of four children. Like the family of a boyfriend that

Lily's mother had rejected, Laura's family continued having children until a son was born. In order to have her younger brother, her family paid multiple social compensation fees, which placed a significant financial burden on the family. Her parents were farmers who grew peanuts, corn, and wheat in the warmer months and worked in a lumber mill during the off-season. According to Laura, it was important to her father to have a son because he was the eldest in his family and thus felt responsible to continue the patrilineal line.

At that point in my fieldwork, all the women I had interviewed came from urban backgrounds. Many were hesitant to even travel to the countryside due to their fear of rural men (see Chapter 2). Laura was the first woman I met from such a rural upbringing. Her perspective provided essential insight into how rural women themselves think about rural men and marriage.

Laura was strikingly beautiful. She was slim, had long flowing hair, porcelain skin, and stood a few inches taller than me (and I am 5'9"). She was warm, sincere, and modest. Laura dressed conservatively, wore no makeup, and did little more than brush her hair to get ready. She was disciplined and focused on her studies, uninterested in cultivating her looks or exploring fashion like many young girls her age. In many ways, she exemplified the traits commonly valued on the marriage market: beauty, education, and kindness.

We became friends, and she agreed to accompany me to two marriage markets. Having grown up in a rural area, she was curious about the urban matchmaking events she had read about in the news, while also willing to assist me in translation during interviews. While I expected that she would draw attention, I did not anticipate that we would be overwhelmed by parents approaching her on behalf of their single sons. We began to joke that she was "participant bait". Despite the humor, she quickly grew exhausted from the attention and frustrated with constantly having to explain that she already had a boyfriend, and justifying his lack of material assets compared to those of the men being offered to her.

During the taxi ride home after the first market we attended together, I asked about her thoughts on marriage. I had incorrectly assumed that she intended to one day marry her boyfriend. She told me that although she was happy in her current relationship, she had no interest in marriage, and her boyfriend was aware of her stance. She explained:

> *I don't want to get married. Firstly, I think I have the ability to support myself in the future. I don't want to rely on others. I have the confidence and I think maybe the life in which you support yourself will be more comfortable than the life where you rely on others. Secondly, I'm afraid. I have seen so many articles talking about the cruelty of marriage. This is so horrible. I think most husbands will change after marriage. There are so many articles that say: "Before marriage he is so sweet and so caring of you. But after marriage he will force you to do this and do that and he will become less caring and less patient with you." Just like a different person. No matter how careful he [my boyfriend] is with me now I don't know what kind of person he will be in the future… I think in this society. More and more women have this opinion. I'm not alone. Many are like me. They choose to be single. They choose to support themselves. I think that it is achievable.*

Although I had heard several women discuss their concerns about losing financial independence after marriage, Laura was the first to frame her fear around a deeper psychological transformation of men. She believed that men become someone else entirely once they are married. While other urban women, like Xiaoyuan, described something like a *Boogeyman,* Laura was describing a *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*[243] situation. This sentiment was echoed in later interviews, where women described men as hiding the bad parts of themselves during dating to lure women in. Laura specifically referred to this change as something frequently described in the media; however, after learning more about her family, I began to wonder whether her own experience may have influenced these fears more than the news articles she cited.

When I asked if she was experiencing pressure to marry, Laura shared that her mother had begun mentioning the importance of finding a good husband within the last two years. Laura has been resisting her mother's involvement, describing her as controlling and untrustworthy when choosing a suitable partner. She noted that her parents' own relationship was unhealthy and that her mother, in Laura's view, lacks "good insight into what makes a relationship work." At one point she alluded to her father being abusive. While describing his temper, her eyes began to well with tears. She quickly changed the subject, and I did not press further. If I interpreted her reaction correctly, it seemed to confirm some of the same concerns that the urban woman had expressed of rural men treating women inhumanely.

The key difference between Laura's father and the "Boogeyman" bachelors described by other women (see Chapter 2) is that her father was not a sex-starved bare branch. He was a married man with a job and a family, who also had a violent temper. In contrast, the one older unmarried man from Laura's town, whom she described in another conversation (also discussed in Chapter 2) was kind and gentle. While his own father was an abusive alcoholic. Laura's experience with these men, both married and single, clearly shaped her beliefs of both men and marriage. While urban women feared men based on hearsay and media portrayals, and attributed their behavior to their marital status, Laura's fears seemed influenced by her personal interactions with rural men. It was hard not to wonder whether her fear of marriage stemmed not just from broader social anxieties about men but from her own experience living with an unpredictable father.

Laura was confident in her abilities to support herself. She was comfortable remaining unmarried while continuing her current relationship, provided her boyfriend respected her wishes and did not pressure her to escalate their relationship with marriage or children.

Her views on becoming a mother were shaped by her family as well. As the eldest of four, she had spent much of her life caring for her siblings. She told me:

> *I don't want to give birth to a child. Because I think it's very hard for your body. I don't think [my body] can afford it. And I don't like children because in my little time, I have looked after so many brothers and sisters. … So I don't think I need a child to care for me when I am old because I have my brother and my sisters. Maybe if they were to have children, those children can care for me.*

[243] A story of a respected scientist who creates a potion that transforms him into his violent and monstrous alter ego

Most of the singletons I interviewed were only children, and as such, they reported a great deal of pressure to both marry and have children. Creating their own nuclear family would ensure that someone would care for them in their old age. In contrast, Laura's large family gave her more freedom to decide whether or not to marry. Because the responsibility of elder care was distributed among multiple siblings, she was less obligated to take on the burden herself. She felt secure that her future niblings would care for her in her later years as if she were their own mother. Laura added that had she been an only child, she would likely feel much more pressure to marry.

Like Lily and her sister June, Laura's perspective on marriage, masculinity, and family formation was shaped by the dynamics of her family of origin and, particularly the temperaments and behaviors of their respective fathers. In both families, their fathers' emotional availability, or lack thereof, played a significant role in how their daughters imagined a future husband. All three women discussed thus far in this chapter expressed a deep mistrust of the average Chinese man. Despite the differences in class and geography, all emphasize the need for financial independence and prioritize their careers over romantic relationships, despite the social pressures to pair.

Jia: Elite Married Feminist Woman

姓名 Name	Jia
性别 Sex	Female
婚姻状况 Marital Status	Married
年龄 Age	33 (Born 1990)
高度 Height	152 cm (5'0")
重量 Weight	56kg (125lbs)
教育 Education	PhD in Sociology
职业 Occupation	Full-time Professor
资产 Assets	House and Car.
老家 Hometown	Wuhan
家庭 Family	Family of 3. Only Child

寻求 Looking for	Originally, not looking for marriage. But found a man who was “trainable”

I met Jia, a junior professor in the social sciences in her mid-thirties, through a mutual friend. A self-proclaimed feminist, a title she often reiterated, Jia had no intentions of marrying when she met her now-husband, Bowen, during graduate school. They were both only children from Wuhan and bonded over shared academic interests and a fondness for their hometown cuisine. Although I never met Bowen, Jia described him as “rather boring, but kind.” When asked why she ultimately agreed to marry someone she found uninteresting, she explained what she considered the most important quality a husband could have: “He is very trainable.”

Jia’s understanding of male “trainability” reflects a conception of gender that echoes the very binaries feminist scholars such as Michelle Rosaldo (1974) sought to dismantle. In Jia’s view, “girls become women naturally,” while “boys have to be raised to achieve some things before they become men.” From this perspective, being in a relationship with a man necessitated a process of training. As she put it, “Unless I want to be alone, I have to be willing to train my husband.” Jia likened this dynamic to a mother raising an adult child, a role she found “exhausting.” Yet, among all the men she had encountered during her years as a single woman, she found Bowen the most receptive to her guidance.

Jia associated Bowen’s trainability with his upbringing in Wuhan. According to her, “Wuhan women are known for being very aggressive and assertive. We have a reputation of being strong-willed and strong-minded.” She explained that men raised in this cultural environment often develop softer expressions of masculinity. In her view, such men are more accustomed to female authority and are therefore more malleable as partners. She described Bowen’s family as an example of this gender dynamic, where the roles seemed flipped compared to much of China. He grew up in a house where his mother was the primary household earner, running a business and did not cook, while his father followed her lead in most matters. Jia anticipated that if she and Bowen were to have children, her FIL would likely take on the primary caregiving role, while her MIL would continue her professional pursuits, doing the “real work”.

Jia’s belief in the importance of early gender role exposure aligns with her criteria for a suitable partner. In contrast to many of my interlocutors who expressed anxiety or resentment toward their MIL, Jia admired hers. She respected the assertiveness of Bowen’s mother and believed her influence had equipped Bowen with the behavioral and emotional flexibility she valued in a husband. For Jia, this form of social conditioning made him a viable marriage partner.

I initially questioned whether Jia’s use of the term “trainable” reflected a belief in adaptability or merely a form of socialization. Jia seemed to intentionally seek a man who had internalized a gender dynamic in which women held more authority. Her choice reflected a conscious rejection of her own family structure. Unlike Bowen, Jia did not have a close relationship with her parents and described their marriage as traditionally patriarchal. She explicitly stated that she would never allow her parents to help choose a spouse, insisting that “love does not work that way,” going on to explain that love “depends on what you want, not your parents.” She believed that if her mother

had used a matchmaker, she would have chosen someone similar to Jia's father, exactly what she was trying to avoid.

The distinction between "programming" and "trainability" was clarified in a later interview with another woman who shared a similar preference but used the term "flexibility." This young woman argued that psychological flexibility was more common in women than in men. She explained that, "Men need to come from a good family because they need an early model of a relationship. Whereas women are capable of self-awareness and can keep perspective, and address their feelings. Men don't have the same talent." This essentialist framing placed emotional capacity within a binary logic that naturalizes gender differences. It implies that men's emotional development is rigid and largely fixed in childhood, whereas women's emotional labor is both adaptive and responsible for shaping men's maturity. As a result, women are expected to select partners who have already been properly molded by maternal care, suggesting that men without such early intervention are therefore hopeless.

This type of highly gendered framing helps explain Jia's own paradox. She did not wish to reproduce her parents' marriage but deliberately sought a partner likely to reproduce his own parents' relationship. Her marriage strategy was thus deeply shaped by divergent models of family life and her desire to correct the imbalances she had witnessed during her own childhood. I wish I could have had the opportunity to interview Bowen as well to better understand why he had chosen to marry Jia and if her family of origin affected his choice, or if his understanding of gendered emotional competency aligned with his wife's.

One evening, Jia, Laura, and I had dinner together. As the only one among us who was married, Jia took the opportunity to impart her perspective on Chinese men and offer advice on how to navigate partner selection. Her warnings echoed some of Laura's concerns. Jia stated:

> *Most men have such traditional ideas about what it means to be a wife and husband that they eventually change their attitude once you're actually married. They put in so much effort into the wooing process, paying for things and giving presents. But you're not living with them yet. You're not sharing household responsibilities, domestic duties or money. You don't see how they live. You're just seeing the best side of them. And then once you're actually in a relationship and they have you, they stop trying.*

Laura responded with some of her own theories about men's dual personas. Jia acknowledged the risk by advising that such outcomes could be avoided by identifying men with trainable qualities. She described how she tested these qualities by observing family dynamics and introducing ideas that challenged conventional gender roles with Bowen. A man's willingness to adjust in these scenarios, Jia claimed, could be a good indicator of whether or not a man would make a suitable partner. Laura nodded attentively, likely feeling validated by her elder's shared view.

Jia went on to describe some of her husband's "training". Some of the strategies she used resembled a behavior conditioning framework that was not unlike that of training a pet. She described the system she developed in order to get her husband to do chores without being instructed:

Each chore is worth a certain number of points and is stored on a spreadsheet. If the number of points by the two parties at the end of the month is not roughly even, then shame is used as a motivation to get the person with less points to improve their behavior the following month.

Jia explained that using shame was the only method that ensured an equal distribution of labor. Although she has acknowledged that Bowen came from a family where the father performed much of the domestic labor, she believed he still needed to be conditioned to do so autonomously, without being asked. While her framing of this dynamic might seem infantilizing, Jia appeared satisfied with the outcome in which Bowen took on more household labor than she did, unfazed by the amount of disgrace she supposedly accrued for herself, as the entire system was an elaborate scheme to train her husband.

When I inquired about Jia and Bowen's emotional involvement, I was surprised to learn that they spend so little time together. She insisted that their lack of overlapping hobbies was a benefit. Each pursued their interests independently, and when they did spend time together, they rarely talked. Jia described their connection as sharing "a lot of unspoken intimacy." This pragmatic arrangement stood in contrast to the "best friend" model of romantic partnership that many other women I interviewed described as their ideal. For Jia, the relationship's functionality and mutual respect mattered more than common interests or emotional expressiveness thus redefining what factors are prioritized in China's marriage economy.

Together, Laura and Jia's perspectives on men and marriage exemplify how highly educated women are increasingly acting as gatekeepers to men's access to marriage. Their own experiences with patriarchal fathers has shaped their views on the kind of men worth marrying. The only men they considered partnering with were those perceived as gentle, open-minded, and unlikely to diminish their hard-won autonomy. Both expressed fears that men conceal their true intentions until after marriage, trapping women into traditional domestic roles. Despite their ten year age gap, the two women's views aligned closely. It is likely that the conversation we shared that night over dinner will continue to inform Laura's evolving stance on men and marriage.

Like Lily and June, Laura and Jia offer insight into how the experiences of different generations on the dating market are influencing the perspectives of younger women. Older women validate certain fears, confirm widely circulated rumors, and share firsthand accounts that help younger women to navigate the pressures of marriage. These intergenerational conversations are actively shaping which expressions of masculinity are considered acceptable in the roles of husband and father. For perhaps the first time in Chinese history, women are playing a significant role in defining what manhood can and should look like. As we will see in the final case study below, some women are choosing to reject men altogether and stepping into roles traditionally reserved for husbands, thereby challenging the dominant models of masculinity and competing with men in both intimate and familial roles - thus contributing to the male singleness epidemic.

Ru: A "T" Lesbian - A Queering of Masculinity

姓名 Name	Ru
性别 Sex	Female
婚姻状况 Marital Status	Single
年龄 Age	30 (Born 1993)
高度 Height	cm (5’5”)
重量 Weight	54kg (122lbs)
教育 Education	BA and MA in Accounting
职业 Occupation	Full-time CEO of her own company
资产 Assets	House and Car
老家 Hometown	Enshi City, Hubei Provence
家庭 Family	Originally from a family of 3. Parents are divorced and remarried with children. Two half siblings.
寻求 Looking for	Girlfriend Stable career that allows her to be self-sufficient.

My final case study offers a different perspective on how Chinese women are actively involved in shaping patterns of masculinity and male singleness. Ru, my oldest and closest Chinese friend, and I met in 2013 when she was nineteen and I was twenty-nine. At the time, I was her English teacher, and she was the only visibly queer woman I had encountered during my first few months in Beijing. She had short, dyed-blue hair and dressed in baggy clothes and baseball caps, not unlike the K-pop idols of the time. We both sensed a mutual queerness and would find excuses to talk after class. Despite the power dynamic of the teacher-student relationship, I welcomed the opportunity when she invited me out for coffee.

At the time, my girlfriend and I had just moved to Beijing. We were struggling to find other queer women and often felt out of place in the city’s gay bars which targeted male clientele. We found those spaces were not particularly welcoming to foreign women and we wondered where Beijing’s lesbian communities gathered. I quickly came out to Ru and spoke openly about my partner to avoid any misunderstanding about my identity or intentions. This seemed to ease her concerns and she soon shared her own experiences. We began spending time together outside of school and

would regularly go on double dates with our respective partners, developing a *jie jie/mei mei*[244] relationship. She introduced us to a few underground lesbian bars in the city, many of which were hidden in the backrooms of other businesses and required insider knowledge or passwords for entry, reflecting the still-precarious position of queer women in urban China.

Ru shared that living openly as a butch lesbian in China, known as a "T,"[245] had caused serious tensions within her family. Her father was especially disapproving of both her sexuality and masculine gender presentation. During family gatherings, he demanded that she wear wigs and dresses to disguise her queer identity. While she had come out to her family, they dismissed her self-identification as a temporary phase.

Like many queer individuals in restrictive familial and social environments, Ru explored multiple strategies to live a life on her own terms. One of her earliest ideas was to attend graduate school abroad, meet and marry a woman from a country that allowed for gay marriage and offered a pathway to citizenship. While she did move to New York for two years, she only dated other Chinese women during that time and eventually returned to China after obtaining her Master's degree.

After relocating back to Beijing, she considered entering into a cooperative marriage[246] with a gay man. The plan was for her and her gay-male-cousin to each marry the other's partner and buy two apartments in the same building. They would live with their actual partners for the majority of the time and then switch places during parental visits in order to maintain the appearance of heterosexuality[247] (see Figure 83). This elaborate plan ultimately fell apart when both couples broke up, and Ru and her cousin both returned to Hubei province to be closer to their families.

Today, both Ru and her cousin live more openly, although full familial acceptance remains uneven. Her mother has gradually come to accept her daughter's sexuality, and has even met some of her previous girlfriends. Meanwhile, Ru's father remains in denial, telling himself and his extended family that his daughter's unmarried status is due to her ambition and career focus, just like many other high-achieving women of her generation. In his eyes, she is simply prioritizing financial independence over marriage and family life for now and will come around to marriage in a few more years.

Ru has expressed a strong desire to settle down with a woman and function as a provider in a long-term relationship. Though legal same-sex marriage remains unavailable in China, she aspires to

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[244] 姐姐/妹妹 (*jiejie/meimei)* - "older sister/ younger sister"

[245] T - Chinese equivalent to butch lesbians. A masculine presenting woman who takes on the male gender roles of a traditional heteronormative relationship. T is short for Tomboy. The opposite of which is P for 老婆（*laopo*） which means "wife"

[246] For more on marriages of convenience see: Wang, S.Y. (2019). When Tongzhi Marry: Experiments of Cooperative Marriage between Lalas and Gay Men in Urban China. *Feminist Studies*, 45(1). 13-35. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.45.1.0013

[247] I met a group of lesbians in Chongqing who had participated in such marriages of convenience. They shared photos from the most recent wedding in which all the attendees from their generation were visibly queer, though they said their parents' generation either remained unaware or chose not to acknowledge the truth.

fulfill a role culturally analogous to that of a traditional Chinese husband. To achieve this, she has been acquiring the same assets expected of heterosexual men seeking wives. She owns a three-bedroom condominium in a high-end development. As seen in earlier sections on "phantom rooms" (see "High Salary" section above), two of her rooms are virtually empty, one only housing a yoga mat and a dust covered keyboard, signaling her aspiration to participate in hobbies that may attract a girlfriend. Her luxury car is rarely driven and the rest of her apartment is largely unfurnished. Except for a king sized bed, and a dining table, the space feels mostly bare. The expensive marble floors, high ceilings and ornate molding clash with the single bean back and camping table that function as her living room furniture. The two tables are covered with ashtrays full of cigarette butts and half empty bottles of Coca-Cola or beer, a near replica of Jiang's apartment. Ru lives like any other middle class bachelor, in their much too big apartment waiting for a woman to come and outfit the disheveled void with life and care, making the house a home.

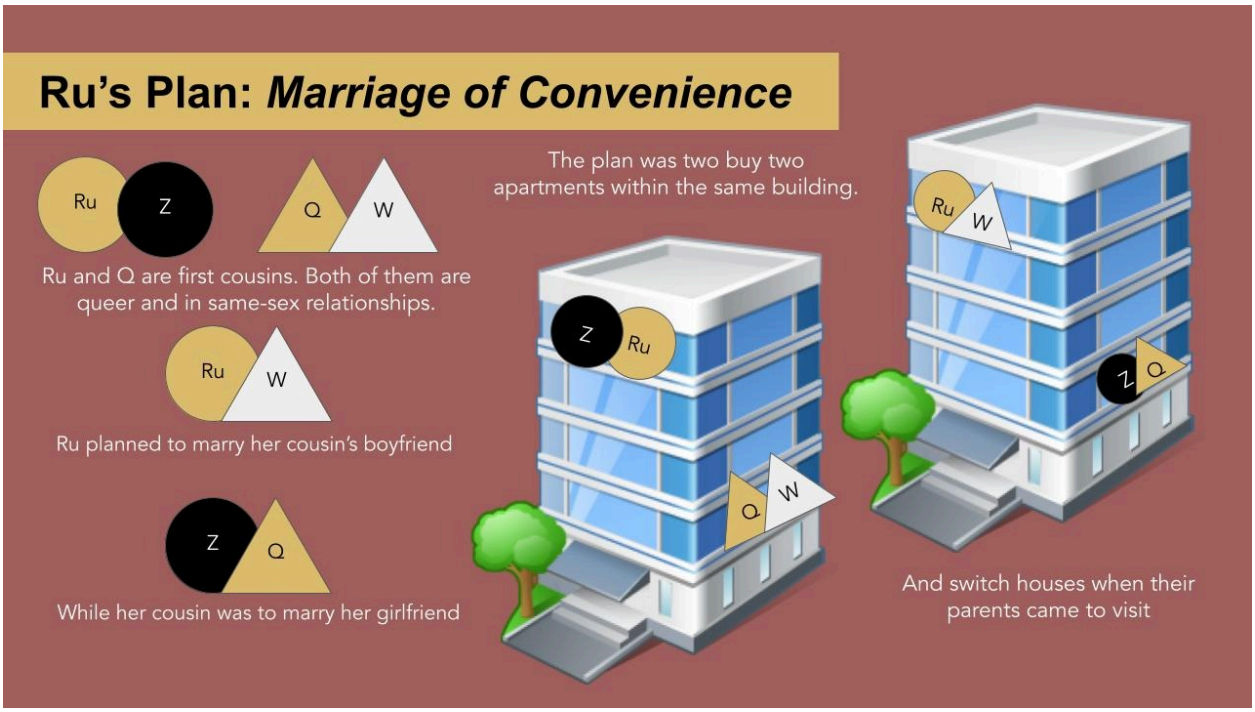

Figure 83. *Diagram of Ru's original marriage plan. (Slide by author from lecture on Queer Kinship)*

When I asked about her plans for children, Ru said that while she liked the idea, she did not believe it was currently feasible in China. Instead, she envisioned herself as a devoted aunt to her much younger siblings' children. Her parents had both remarried and had more children within the parameters of the state family planning regulations, meaning Ru has two younger siblings who are both 15 years her junior. Her mother has already instructed her younger son that given Ru's identity, and likely childlessness, that he will need to care for his older sister in the future. As with Laura, Ru's ability to pursue a non-normative life path has been enabled by her younger siblings who will share the burden of eldercare when their parents age. Also like Laura, had Ru been an only child, the pressure to marry and produce grandchildren would likely have been much greater.

Ru represents an alternative trajectory available to some Chinese women who resist heteronormative family formations. By blending traditional masculine and feminine roles, she has

created a life that accommodates both her queer identity and her desire for social stability. She seeks a partner using similar strategies employed by single men her age, namely property, economic signaling, and selective gender performances. In doing so, she is not simply imitating masculinity but helping to refine it. Her role within the marriage market doubles the competition: first by removing herself from the pool of available brides, and second, by attracting women who might otherwise marry men.

Her story contributes to our understanding of the singleness epidemic in two key ways. First, Ru's queer life course is a case of voluntary singleness (in terms of marital status) that is not caused by lack of options, but by a deliberate refusal of normative conjugal structures. Second, her masculine presentation and material accomplishments create new standards for masculinity that less wealthy men may find difficult to meet. In this way Ru does not simply opt out of the marriage system, but forge new pathways through it. She subtly reshapes the economy of marriage by queering what it means to be a desirable provider and partner in contemporary China.

Gatekeepers Conclusions

The social transformations brought about by China's economic reforms and implementations of the OCP have significantly altered the status of women relative to men, disrupting traditional marriage systems. Historically, women held lower social positions due to limited access to education, restricted financial autonomy, and were often compelled to "marry up" to improve their social position. Today, however, women are both fewer in number and increasingly better-educated than in previous generations (Lu & Du, 2023), giving them greater leverage in the marriage market. As women begin to outperform men academically and professionally, they are shifting the dynamics of pursuit. In China's marriage economy, women are no long simply being consumed, many are now in control of the transaction, in the position of consumer.

As women's position improves, their personal desires clash with state interests. The Chinese government, which relies on traditional gender roles to promote population growth, has positioned unmarried women as the primary threat to national stability. Because Chinese men and state narratives tend to align under a patriarchal framework, women who choose to remain single are often scapegoated. Government discourse has cast unmarried women as selfish or immature (Gong et al., 2017, p. 206), accusing them of having unrealistic standards and blaming them for the rising numbers of involuntary bachelors (To, 2013). This framing distracts from the structural roots of the demographic crisis and uses stigma to try to re-integrate women into the institution of marriage. However, as we saw in several of the case studies, these pressures are increasingly ineffective, as many simply opt out of marriage altogether.

The shift in women's social standing has also created internalized tensions. Many high-achieving women now view marriage as a personal choice rather than a financial or social necessity (Lake 2018). Yet lingering cultural expectations of hypergamy insisting that men be taller, more educated, and wealthier, remain thereby limiting the pool of acceptable partners. As a result, many elite women struggle to find men who meet both their personal and social standards on account of their being "too excellent", leading to frustration or disinterest in marriage.

Some women, like June and Lily, choose to remain single unless they meet a partner who meets their high standards. Jia delayed any consideration of marriage until she met someone who fit her criteria. Although aware their perceived market value may decline with age due to fertility concerns, many are willing to wait or opt out entirely. A life without a husband is no longer unimaginable. For others, like Laura, the decision not to marry is tied to fears of male behavior. Cultural narratives, media portrayals, and intergenerational stories depict men as controlling, abusive and unsavory characters. Laura, for instance, worries that men change after marriage, becoming dangerous only after a legal bond is secured. These anxieties are rooted in both lived experiences and collective memories, casting a long shadow over the institution of marriage and help explain why an increasing number of Chinese women are choosing to remain single.

Women's refusal to marry is exacerbating China's already critical singledom epidemic. Even if every Chinese woman were married, tens of millions of men would remain unmatched due to gender imbalance. One unintended outcome of population control policies has been a generation of women with greater autonomy and declining interest in marriage. Yet for Chinese men, marriage remains one of the few socially recognized paths to achieving adult masculinity and fulfilling filial obligations (see Chapter 1).

Whether welcome or not, women's growing power to choose is transforming marriage. Fewer women allow their parents to select a husband, though families still shape relationship decisions, in terms of women's standards, men's trainability, or vetoing a suitor, as with June's mother. Women are also delaying marriage until after career establishment, shifting average marriage ages and challenging long-held associations between female youth, fertility, and value.

But it is not just marriage that women are affecting. As the gatekeepers of which men can marry, women are also redefining masculinity. While some still value traditional markers like income or proximity to hometowns, many women now prioritize personality, emotional intelligence, and family values. In four of the five case studies, a masculinity that demonstrated emotional awareness is seen as more desirable. This shift stands in contrast to national campaigns warning of a "crisis of masculinity" and encouraging boys to toughen up (Zheng, 2015). Jia, Laura, and even Lily's mother refuse to tolerate men who lack respect for women. Rather than seek strong "protectors," many women prefer partners who are "trainable."

Ru, however, challenges masculinity at an even deeper level. Drawing on the work of feminist writers like Judith Butler (1990; 2004) and Jack Halberstam (1998), we see that masculinity is not inherently tied to male bodies but instead is a performative role (also see Weston, 1993). Ru's choice to pursue life as a "husband" in a same-sex relationship demonstrates that masculinity can be reimagined entirely. Her navigation of romantic pursuits, domestic partnership, and even kinship mirror, and even innovates upon, the social scripts traditionally reserved for men. Through her example, we see that the future of Chinese masculinity may not lie in reforming men, but in expanding who is allowed to embody it.