suggesting that moral virtue might outweigh economic shortcomings**.** Though disadvantaged by income, he was described with sympathy rather than fear.

None of these men were portrayed as monsters, even though some fit the demographic profile of lifelong bachelors. What distinguished them from the vilified *guanggun* of literature and film was the storyteller's personal connection. Relationships, often familial or neighborly, made it possible to see their singleness as unfortunate rather than threatening. The causes were understood as beyond their control, though each limited their ability to provide, protect, or procreate.

Case Study: Tao, 47

Men who reach their forties unmarried are often seen as unlikely to ever marry. When I began this research, I expected to meet men who, like the bachelors in *Single Man*, were victims of circumstance, kind-hearted marginalized individuals who had failed to marry through no fault of their own. My sympathy for such men was shaped by growing up around rural masculinity in my own country. Yet one encounter with a man named Tao forced me to confront why rural single men are often imagined as threatening.

I met Tao on China's most popular dating site, *Momo*. His profile showed a man resembling the artist Ai Weiwei and claimed he spoke fluent English. This surprised me, since he worked in furniture construction and held a rural Hebei *hukou*, living a few hours from Wuhan. Such a background is not usually associated with English fluency. He explained that he had once worked in international trade in Shanghai before returning home thirteen years earlier to care for his aging parents. Now at forty-seven, as the eldest son and only unmarried sibling, he saw this as his duty. His sense of obligation aligned with traditional ideals of filial piety, but also isolated him. He had no peers, few social contacts, and no romantic relationships since his twenties.

When Tao offered to come meet me in Wuhan, he traveled nearly four hours by bus. I was immediately struck by his appearance. He had strong body odor, a stained shirt, and yellowed teeth marked by years of smoking. His nose was red and veined, reminiscent of heavy drinkers I had known. These embodied cues, together with my awareness of prevailing stereotypes about rural bachelors, activated an instinctive unease. I tried to suppress these associations, telling myself that my reaction might be shaped by classes and gendered biases. Yet my body remained on high alert. For the first time in six months of fieldwork, I felt the visceral fear that many of my female interlocutors had explained to me when describing an imagined encounter with a *guanggun*.

We met in a busy cafe before walking along the river. Tao was talkative and polite and he proudly described caring for his widowed mother. Although she still cooked and cleaned for him, he saw himself as her protector and provider. This arrangement allowed him to fulfil, in limited form, some of the masculine ideals associated with the Confucian values of manhood. In the absence of a wife, he was still able to enact moral duties to his family. His labor in furniture construction expressed *wu* masculinity through physical strength, while his English fluency and prior white-collar experience hinted at *wen* refinement. Yet his social world had collapsed to a single domestic unit of an elderly woman and her middle-aged son.

My unease resurfaced as we moved from the river to a busy snack street, where he began to touch me. First, he touched my arm to keep me from an oncoming scooter, then placed his hand on my back, and later grabbed my wrist without a clear reason. The first time felt understandable, but the repetition crossed a line. When I asked him to stop, he told me I was "too sensitive." His refusal to acknowledge my verbalized boundaries after repeated clarification of my role, as a researcher and not a romantic partner, transformed my academic curiosity into fear. In that moment, Tao ceased to be an abstract interlocutor and became the embodiment of what urban Chinese women say they fear. Tao, like the *guanggun* of all the media I had consumed, had become the unrefined man, excluded from kinship networks, whose marginalization erodes the moral codes that govern appropriate male behavior.

Later that evening, after we had parted ways, he sent me a stream of messages, voice notes, photos, and even a video of a romantic song featuring a white woman singing in Chinese:

> *I hope that 50 years from now, I will still have you around*
> *Sitting in a rocking chair, running my fingers through your hair.*

His persistence blurred the lines between politeness and fixation. When I finally responded to end communication, he wrote, "You are being too sensitive. Don't worry about Chinese men because they do not dare raping today. The last rape case in China was in 2013." I had never mentioned rape. His unsolicited mention of it suggested both defensiveness and self-awareness. He likely recognized the stereotype of the dangerous, sexually deprived bachelor and sought to distance himself from it, even as his behavior reinforced the very image he was denying.

In retrospect, this encounter revealed how deeply the cultural scripts of fear of rural single men are embedded, not only in Chinese women's narratives but also in my own embodied reactions. My discomfort was not only about Tao's behavior but about what he represented, which had become a collision between structural exclusion and unmet masculine expectations. Men like Tao are denied access to marriage and intimacy but remain judged by the same patriarchal standards that define masculinity through sexual and familial success. His awkward chivalry, his need to assert control over physical space, and his inability to read emotional cues can all be understood as attempts to reclaim dignity in a world that has rendered him invisible.

Yet these same behaviors make him appear dangerous. This duality of pity and fear captures the moral ambivalence surrounding China's bachelors. They are both victims of demographic and economic inequality and potential perpetrators in the gendered imagination. Tao's story thus illustrates how social isolation, frustrated masculinity, and structural exclusion coalesce into a figure that unsettles both sympathy and safety.

This encounter was the only time during my fieldwork that an interlocutor made me feel unsafe. I do not suggest that stereotypes of rural bachelors as predatory or unrefined reflect the reality of most unmarried men in China. Rather, Tao's behavior illustrates how the actions of a few can reinforce broader narratives of danger that shape public perceptions of men with similar identities. As the following chapters demonstrate, the vast majority of single men I met were respectful and self-aware, careful to observe social boundaries. Yet the affective residue of fear produced in this single interaction underscores how fragile the boundary can be between empathy and

apprehension, and how easily individual encounters become entangled with collective anxieties about masculinity and singleness in contemporary China.

Boogeyman Conclusion

The *guanggun* represents a marginalized social identity that has long been used to degrade single men for their unmarried status. The term functions as a generic placeholder for rural bachelors, evoking fear and moral anxiety in the collective imagination. As Susan Greenhalgh (2012) argues, the Chinese states have often used these "excess men" as scapegoats for social instability, framing them as potential perpetrators of violence and thus undeserving of empathy or aid. These images are sustained through media portrayals in paintings, poems, songs, films, and new stories, as well as through everyday storytelling that circulates and mutates like a centuries-old game of telephone. Yet the voices of the men themselves remain largely unheard. The film, *Single Man* makes an attempt to represent their perspective, but the majority of depictions continue to cast unmarried rural men as social villains rather than complex individuals.

My own attempt to capture the story of a man who most closely fit the profile of a *guanggun* revealed how deeply entrenched these stereotypes are. My reaction to Tao's behavior, shaped by fear and cultural preconceptions, limited my ability to see beyond the figure of the dangerous bachelor. This encounter demonstrated how easily stereotypes can be reproduced, even by researchers who are aware of and seek to challenge them. With more time, resources, and a stronger sense of safety, I might have been able to engage more fully with Tao's perspective and better understand the social and emotional logic of his actions.

I also recognize that my own positionality shaped the outcome of this research. As a female ethnographer with a history of experiencing sexual violence, whose instinctive response to physical boundary violations is to fight, I was perhaps not ideally suited for this aspect of fieldwork. I had assumed that my past experiences would enable me to approach participants with greater empathy, but instead, I entered the field with unhealed wounds that left me hypervigilant. In this interaction with Tao, I found myself acting like a hammer, treating even subtle signs of sexual advances as nails. Although this was my only encounter that made me feel unsafe, it also remained my only point of reference, as I was unable to connect with other bachelors living in rural areas who shared similar social and demographic circumstances. Most of the unmarried men I spoke with were either younger or living in urban settings, which limited my ability to contextualize Tao's experience more fully.

Despite these limitations, my experience with Tao offered critical insight into how and why unmarried men become so heavily stigmatized and why they, in turn, are so eager to marry. The next chapter will explore how this stigma extends beyond individual men to their families, shaping parental anxieties about their sons' futures. It will examine how parents' fear of the *guanggun* label motivates their involvement in matchmaking and how this cultural urgency to marry, thereby avoiding becoming a "bad man", has given rise to a vast commercial industry dedicated to eradicating singleness.

CHAPTER 3: Business of Marriage (Part I) Match Makers and Marriage Markets: Parental-Facilitated Marriage-Assistance Industries

As we saw in the last two chapters, marriage remains an important milestone for Chinese men, tied both to fulfilling filial obligations (Chapter 1) and avoiding the stigma of being labelled a *guanggun* (Chapter 2). Parents share in this responsibility, since part of their own filial duty is to ensure their children marry and produce descendants before they themselves pass away (Chan & Chen, 2024; Ikels, 2004; Keimig, 2021). For many, this obligation means stepping in directly to search for a spouse on their child's behalf, a phenomenon that is well documented in news sources, and can be seen in public parks across China.[107]

At a park I visited in Wuhan, I met Mrs. Zhou, an elderly mother in her seventies, who stood clutching a hand written flier with her adult son's basic information listed. At thirty-eight years old, he was still unmarried, and she, like the hundreds of other parents who gather at the weekly event, was determined to find him a wife. When I approached to read her flier, she asked if I was looking for a husband. I explained that I was a researcher studying singleness in China. She admitted that her son did not know she was there, but explained that since he was busy with work, she hoped to identify some suitable options and then make the introduction herself.

Meanwhile, of the single adults I spoke with during my fieldwork (n = 50), only three expressed a desire for their parents' involvement in their marriage selection. One man explained why he wanted to choose his own spouse this way:

> *They [my parents] live in the countryside and only know girls from out there who probably didn't go to college. I am looking for a wife who lives here in [the city], who I can have a conversation with. My mom would only care about whether the girl was young and healthy enough to have children. We have different values when it comes to choosing a partner.*

Such generational differences illustrate the tension between contemporary ideas of romantic choice and enduring expectations of parental authority. In centuries past, parents arranged marriages with no input from their children (Chan & Chen, 2024; Lin, 2018; Sommer, 2000; Wong, 2016). Today, legal reforms require marriages be entered consensually (Liu & Mu, 2023), providing young adults greater agency and contributing to delayed marriage, higher divorce rates, and even the decisions by some to forgo marriage altogether (Fincher, 2014; Gu, 2022; Liu & Mu, 2023; Wong, 2003). Yet despite these changes, both cultural norms and state discourses continue to pressure young adults to marry, and many parents remain eager to help.

The next two chapters examine the industries and services that have developed over the last two decades in response to China's so-called "singleness epidemic". Framing singleness as a problem that needs to be solved, the following chapter focuses on the industries designed for the singles themselves and the rise of self-initiated pairing methods. Meanwhile, this chapter turns to parents

[107] Example of a news story about parental matchmaking in China: Hunt, K. (2013 Nov. 3). Glut of women at Shanghai's marriage market. *CNN*. https://www.cnn.com/2013/11/03/world/asia/shanghai-marriage-market#:~:text=With%20almost%20three%20times%20as,women%20must%20be%20under%2033.

and the strategies they use to secure partners for their adult children. It asks: if China is moving away from arranged marriages, why are so many parents still actively involved in matchmaking? What methods are they using? And how successful are they at finding spouses for their children? I begin with a historical overview of how parental involvement has changed over the past century. The discussion then turns to the evolving role of professional matchmakers and the skepticism many parents express toward the commercialization of love, followed by an examination of new platforms that allow parents to engage in matchmaking without an intermediary. The chapter concludes by evaluating the success rates of parental efforts and considering alternative reasons, beyond securing a marriage, that motivate parents to remain involved in their children's romantic lives. I argue that (1) today's parental matchmaking practices are rooted in traditional forms but hybridized to fit contemporary conditions, and (2) that their participation extends beyond marriage and serves to manage anxieties and reinforce social values.

Parents' Involvement in Chinese Marriage

For most of Chinese history, marriages were universal and arranged by parents. Because marriage fulfilled the duties of filial piety for both parents and their children, arrangements were often facilitated by go-betweens, typically professional matchmakers (Lin, 2018, p. 3). The goal was to ensure the stability of the larger family system, which meant that parental interests usually outweighed individual desire (Lin et al., 2019, p. 30). A common expression at the time was that "spouses were matched by go-betweens and decided by parents"[108] (Chan & Chen, 2024, p. 32). These practices remained intact until the twentieth century.

With the fall of the dynastic system came new laws regulating marriage practices. After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, marriage laws required unions to be entered consensually, which made fully arranged marriages that went against the children's will illegal (Liu & Mu, 2023, p. 756). Since these reforms, families have increasingly shifted toward individual choice of partners (Lin et al., 2019, p. 29). Greater autonomy encouraged forms of partner selection that resembled Western practices, emphasizing mutual affection and compatibility (Lin, 2018, p.1). Still, many features of traditional marriages persisted.

The transition did not manifest as a clean switch from arrangement to "love marriages." Sociologists Hao Liu and Zheng Mu (2023) argue that this binary thinking around the institution of marriage does not capture the complexity of marriage in most Asian societies, especially those that emphasize familial loyalty. In China, marriage evolved into a hybrid practice where children now typically choose their own spouse but seek parental approval. Between 1980 and 2014, self-initiated marriages rose from fifteen percent to fifty percent of Chinese marriages, a change most visible among educated, urban populations (p. 770). Historically, arranged marriages made sense in agrarian societies where large extended family networks shared labor and resources (p. 757). However, industrialization and urbanization placed greater demands on nuclear households, making spousal compatibility and shared interests more important (p. 770). As more young people migrated to cities for work, self-initiated partner selection became increasingly common (see Chapter 4).

[108] 父母之命媒妁之言 (fùmǔ zhī mìng, méishuò zhī yán) - literally "parents order's matchmaker's words"

Return to Traditional Methods

In recent years, economic and demographic pressures have contributed to a renewed reliance on parental involvement. Specifically, the post-OCP generation of young adults is returning to seeking assistance from others to find suitable partners (Pettier, 2019; 2020). Liu and Mu (2023) note that rising living costs, inequality, and the pressures of single living have encouraged this generation of young people to return to "introduced or even arranged marriages" (p. 757-760). Sociologists Annie Hau Nung Chan & Peier Chen's (2024) suggest that family size changes under the one-child policy have also "deepened interdependence between parents and children," producing greater emotional, social, and financial reliance (p. 33). In this context, cultural expectations of filial piety combine with shrinking family networks to create transgenerational anxieties around marriage.

Attitudes towards the renewed parental involvement is mixed. Historically, arranged marriages were seen as a collective alliance between families, but today they are sometimes viewed as socially regressive and patriarchal (To, 2013, p 15). Nevertheless, many singles accept parental help. Chan & Chen (2024) found that women, in particular, turned to parents for assistance partly due to the gendered ageism unmarried women face as they approach thirty (p.48). As we will see in Chapter 5, my own findings differ as most of the women I interviewed were slightly younger or already married.[109] However, Chan & Chen's study is valuable in showing why some singles actively seek parental involvement, even as others resist it.

Whereas traditional marriage practices offered children little choice, contemporary pairings function more as a hybrid between parental and child self-initiated-selection. Chan & Chen (2024) describe contemporary parental involvement as an "(asymmetrical) alliance" shaped by "increasing uncertainties" (p.48). While this arrangement is framed as collaborative, their research suggests it benefits the parents more than the children, since filial duty places heavier obligations on the subordinate younger generation (p. 31-33; see Chapter 1). An earlier study by Huang et al. (2015) reached a similar conclusion, arguing that parents invest so heavily in their children's marriage because they rely on them for old-age welfare (p. 2). This dynamic means children often trade spousal compatibility for the reassurance of parental welfare.

Other scholars describe these alliances as more balanced. Liu & Mu (2023) use the term "introduction marriages" to describe a system where parents or relatives introduce potential suitors, but the final decision rests with the couple (p. 757). This framing resonates with what I observed in my fieldwork, where many singles rejected fully arranged marriages but still valued parental approval. As Lin et al. (2019) note, adult children often wanted their parents' blessing "to maintain family harmony" (p. 29). This perspective also sheds light on the elderly woman, Mrs. Zhou, introduced at the beginning of this chapter. She was not secretly arranging a marriage for her son, but rather collecting a list of women she had prescreened so that her son would later meet them and make his own choice. Her actions illustrate how enduring expectations of parental involvement shape matchmaking today, helping explain why families remain active in the process even as China moves toward more individualized forms of partnership.

[109] Chan & Chen's (2024) participants were mostly women in their mid-thirties whereas most of the women I interviewed were either single in their twenties or in their thirties but married.

Parents Using Intermediaries (Matchmakers)

Parents will often turn to intermediaries when seeking a spouse for their adult child. In contemporary China, this practice is broadly referred to as "blind dating,"[110] a term used to describe any matchmaking conducted through a third party (Wong, 2014, p. 1). Intermediaries may be a friend or relative of one of the parties, but they can also be "a 'professional' who knows all the young women of marriageable age in an area or community and has knowledge of family backgrounds and social standings and often charges a commission for performing the service" (Monger, 2004, p. 190). "Matchmakers" thus act as "go-betweens" to assist families in finding suitable pairings for their children.[111] Although their role is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, the prestige and function of this position have shifted over time.

In ancient China, matchmakers were typically women (Jordan, 1997) and highly respected for their roles in maintaining family continuity and fulfilling obligations of filial piety (Pettier, 2019, p. vi). A saying from the Confucian "Book of Song" dates back to the 7th century B.C., goes: "How do you split firewood? Without an ax it can't be done. How do you go about finding a wife? Without a go-between it can't be done" (Jordan 1997). The cultural weight of Chinese matchmakers is even reflected in the popular culture of Western audiences, as seen in Disney's *Mulan* (Coats et al., 1998), where the matchmaker is portrayed as powerful, exacting, and central to determining a singleton's marital future. While the animated feature exaggerates for satire, it echoes historical realities where women were judged for their physical attributes (see Figure 42), obedience and reproductive potential (Ebrey, 1990, p. 49). These features are still demanded of many Chinese brides today.

[110] 相亲 (xiāngqīn) - "blind date"

[111] "Matchmakers" are known as either as 媒人 (méirén) or 红娘 (hóngniáng) and are seen as more formal positions than "go-betweens" 中介 (zhōngjiè)

Figure 42. *A still from the 1998 Disney film Mulan. In this scene, the tomboy protagonist is dressed up in "girl drag" by her family in order to impress the matchmaker, who scrutinizes the young girl's body and performance of femininity, noting that she is "too skinny." Because of the matchmaker's power over the family's future, Mulan is desperate to impress the hot-tempered woman.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Juh8GchDNSY

Professional matchmaking predates the Northern Wei dynasty setting of *Mulan*[112] and can be traced to at least the Zhou dynasty, over 2,000 years ago (Pettier, 2017). By the late Ming dynasty, matchmakers operated at all levels of society and played strategic roles in consolidating or elevating family status (Pettier, 2017, p. 96-97). Until about a century ago, marriage registry forms even required the seal of an "introducer" (Jordan, 1997; Xu, 1998).[113] Arrangements were sometimes made for children still in infancy (or even before birth) if two families wished to secure a union (Monger, 2004, p. 65). Such practices illustrate how deeply embedded parental involvement in matchmaking is within Chinese marital practices.

The founding of the PRC in 1949 transformed the institution of marriage. Just as new laws outlawed fully arranged marriages and changed parental involvement, it also affected matchmakers. These reforms encouraged a shift toward what came to be described as "love marriages," embodying the independent spirit of modernity (Pettier, 2019; 2020). Scholars noted that the norm moved from "first wed, then love"[114] to "first love, then wed"[115] (Jordan, 1997). In this context, matchmakers were no longer imperative and instead took on the role of optional facilitators who introduced potential partners, highlighting their virtues and occasionally mediated

[112] The film Mulan is based on the ancient legend of "The Ballad of Mulan" which is set in the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 CE) (Dong 2011, p. 2).

[113] 介绍人 (jièshào rén)- "introducer"

[114] 先结婚后恋爱 (xiān jiéhūn, hòu liàn'ài) - first wed, then love

[115] 先恋爱后结婚 (xiān liàn'ài, hòu jié hūn) - first love, then wed

financial arrangements between families (Monger, 2004, p. 190). This shift parallels Liu & Mu's (2023) concept of "introduction marriages" described above.

Resurgence of Matchmaking

Despite these reforms, recent decades have seen a resurgence of professional matchmaking. Whereas traditional matchmakers acted as personal mediators, today's marriage brokers often run large-scale agencies offering databases and catalogues of available singletons (Monger, 2004, p. 190). My fieldwork suggests that parents are the primary clientele of these services, seeking help as their anxieties about their children's singleness grow. Many agencies actively advertise at marriage markets. Also known as "blind dating corners",[116] these weekly events, which I detail below, were originally intended as spaces for parents to network but are increasingly co-opted by commercial matchmaking enterprises.

Large agencies sometimes send representatives to marriage market events to distribute brochures and recruit clients, as I experienced when I met an employee of Love Happens by Fate - LHBF, a matchmaking agency discussed in the next chapter. Smaller agencies, by contrast, operate exclusively within what Zhang & Sun (2014) consider the "amateur zone"[117] areas of the marriage markets (p. 120). These matchmakers often set up folding chairs in the parks and manage modest client lists ranging from a free dozen to several hundred singles. Their presence highlights the blurred boundaries between parents hiring personal matchmaking as a social tradition and its reinvention as a commercial industry

Mr. Chen - Heavenly Fate Matchmaking

At the end of long rows of blue and pink laminated fliers fluttering in the welcomed summer breeze (see Figure 43), on a plastic table not much higher than knee-height stood out, as most patrons were standing. Behind the small table sat Mr. Chen, a matchmaker in his late fifties, advertising his services with a large white laminated sign that reads *Heavenly Fate Matchmaking* by Teacher Chen (See Figure 44).[118]

[116] 相亲角 (xiāngqīn jiǎo) - literally "blind dating corners"
[117] 业余红娘区 (yèyú hóngniáng qū) - amateur matchmaking zone
[118] 天缘红娘 (tiān yuán hóngniáng) - Heavenly Fate Matchmaking

***Figure 43**. Several customers at a weekly marriage market in Wuhan shop the personal flyers for local singletons. The blue flyers list the details of available bachelors while the pink flyers list the information of single women. Photo by author.*

Spread across his table lie four small photo albums labelled:

(1) Men 1990 and younger
(2) Women 1990 and younger
(3) Men 1990 and older
(4) Women 1990 and older

Figure 44. *Photo of Matchmakers at a weekly Marriage Market in Wuhan. The sign on the rolling tote bag reads, "Heavenly Fate Matchmaking by Mr. Chen." Photo by author.*

Inside are slips of paper listing the credentials of Mr. Chen's clients. The friendly old man allows me and other interested participants, mostly grey-haired parents, to browse through his collection of singletons. He explains that a more complete list is available on WeChat. I immediately noticed the 1990 cutoff of his books. In 2023, the cohort born that year would be turning 33-years-old. Though I did not inquire, I wondered if this division reflected the social stigma surrounding "leftover" men and women. Supporting this suspension of accommodating social norms, there were noticeably more female clients than male, which Mr. Chen explained it was because he set stricter requirements for men, who needed both a minimum level of education and income, since in his view, men must demonstrate their ability to provide for "not only themselves, but their entire family."

Mr. Chen claimed to represent around 1,000 clients, mostly parents acting as proxies on behalf of their children. He hoped to match a third of them by year's end, but when we spoke in October of 2023, he had only paired 150, compared to 300 in the previous year. He worried the decline reflected his aging client base. "Everyone wants people born in 1995 [28 years old]," he lamented. However, most of his clients were already in their thirties.

His pricing structure was modest. For 100 RMB ($16 USD), families could submit a profile to his database for one year, searchable by details like *hukou*, income, degree, height, or weight. For an

additional fee, a client's profile could be included in the physical books he displays at the marriage markets. The contact information for individuals was kept private, and he charges an additional amount to contact and another fee if the match is successful. When I ask my participants about these rates, most agree that they were exceptionally low. One woman suggested that his affordable fees revealed a genuine desire to help. "He must have a good heart and really want to help people find love, so they have a full life," she explained. By contrast, her sister in Qingdao paid nearly 2000 RMB ($325) annually for similar services (discussed in Chapter 5).

Mr. Chen confirmed that his lower rates were meant to cater especially to lower-income families, since, in his words, wealthy men "will always be able to get married," while poorer men "need help proving what they are capable of providing." He emphasized that many young singles were too shy to pursue women without assistance from their parents and experts like him. His own marriage, arranged through a similar service in 2009, bolstered his belief in the system. Watching him interact with parents, I could not help but reflect on how his missing teeth and receding gums marked him as lower class by Western standards, and perhaps aligned him with the very men he represented.

For Mr. Chen, matchmaking is more than business. He considers it essential to his clients' well-being, particularly men. He told me that an unmarried man "cannot be a complete person - there will always be something missing in his life." "An unfinished person,"[119] he explained, is someone who cannot create a family of their own, and can never understand the struggles their parents endured, nor fully appreciate them. For Mr. Chen, singletons, especially only children, face a bleak future: "Once your parents die, you will be the only person in the world. An only child with few relatives…who will care for you?"

Heavenly Fate Matchmaking exemplifies the contemporary reinvention of the matchmaker. Historically, marriage brokers were almost always women, serving as go-betweens for families and negotiating unions that prioritized lineage and collective obligation. Today, figures like Mr. Chen reflect that men as well as women position themselves as entrepreneurs, using databases and digital platforms to connect families in a commercialized process. Through his affordable fees, Mr. Chen casts himself as a community-minded intermediary who helps parents secure futures for their children while preserving old ideals about marriage as the key to adult respectability. His case highlights how the roles of matchmakers have evolved from respected mediators who seal family alliances to service providers who straddle traditional and modernity in a rapidly changing dating economy.

Distrust of Matchmakers

Even back in the dynastic era, when matchmakers were considered indispensable, their reputation was uneven (Hao, 2010). The transactional nature of their work generated suspicion, since their income depended on completing marches (Jordan, 1997; Lín, 1992). Many believed that matchmakers sought to arrange as many unions as possible, and quickly as possible, regardless of compatibility (Macgowan, 1909 as cited in Jordan, 1997). A popular saying capturing this sentiment is "Among ten matchmakers, there are nine liars"[120] (Ruǎn, 1989 as cited in Jordan,

[119] 未竟之人 (Wèijìng zhī rén) - unfinished or incomplete person
[120] 十媒九诳 (shí méi jiǔ kuáng) - of ten nine lie

1997). Such expressions demonstrate parents' desire to secure marriage for their children and the worry that professionals prioritize profit over happiness.

This skepticism continues in modern China. A large-scale study of over 7,000 couples in seven provinces found that agencies often charge higher fees when parents register on behalf of their children than when singles register themselves (Huang et al., 2015, p. 3). This practice encourages singletons to sign up directly in order to save money. While the researchers did not explain the logic behind the pricing, it highlights how commercial practices can deepen cynicism about matchmaking services. In my own fieldwork, I did not observe such discrepancies, though at the time I was not aware nor asking explicitly about differential pricing.

As the profession has shifted from individual go-betweens to larger, company-like operations, doubts about their intention have persisted. Many of my interlocutors described matchmakers as "opportunists" "preying on anxious parents." One father told me he would never hire a matchmaker for his son, explaining, "Because they have hundreds or even thousands of clients, there is no way they are looking out for my family's best interests." Such attitudes may relate to the scale and location of the business. Jordan (1997) notes that in smaller towns, matchmakers need to maintain honesty to preserve their reputations, but in larger cities, the stereotypes of the greedy or unscrupulous matchmaker remain strong. Of the participants I interviewed who were actively searching for spouses (n = 47), only four were using professional matchmakers. The rest preferred self-selection, citing mistrust of both individuals and agencies. Given that my data comes largely from dense urban areas, it is not surprising that skepticism was the dominant perspective.

Professional Matchmaking Restrictions

Distrust of professional matchmakers is not limited to individuals. Some cities have taken steps to regulate or even ban their presence at marriage markets. In Shanghai, officials have prohibited agencies from advertising or soliciting services at the weekly People's Park marriage market event unless they are formally registered with the city. The restrictions are intended to curb fraudulent behaviors, which has been a persistent problem. One report described how a 70-year old woman was swindled out of 1,800 RMB (about $250 USD) by an unlicensed company.[121] She later told Shanghai Daily, "I hate matchmaking agencies and don't trust any of them." Similarly, Qian Liu (2025) recounts cases from Beijing where parents lost thousands of dollars to scammers posing as matchmakers who sometimes sold fake contact information or even hired men to impersonate potential suitors (p. 26). Such stories circulate widely in the media, reinforcing skepticism toward commercial matchmakers.

To prevent scams, Shanghai's parks have enforced strict rules against unlicensed vending. During my visit to People's Park, I witnessed police patrols passing through about once an hour. Six officers walked in a line. The first carried a megaphone blasting a prerecorded message reminding attendees that soliciting services on park grounds was illegal. The following two officers filmed the crowd with cellphones raised above their heads. The last three officers removed signs attached to any public property. At one point, I watched an officer throw away an advertisement for

[121] Zhang, T. (2014 Sept 2). Town Crier! Crackdown at Shanghai's People's Park Marriage Market. *That's Magazine*. https://www.thatsmags.com/shanghai/post/6577/town-crier-peoples-park-marriage-market-crackdown/

matchmaking services that was resting on a public trashcan. As soon as the officers left, the owner retrieved the laminated paper and the stand from the bin, wiped it clean, and set it back in place.

Despite the rules, local matchmakers, presumably without permits, continued to work with only minor interruptions. Because the megaphone could be heard more than 100 meters away, they had time to pack up their belongings within thirty seconds, reemerging once the patrol had passed. Unable to post advertisements on park property, they relied on creative strategies. Most taped laminated A4 fliers together into accordion-style stacks that could be quickly folded and hidden under their seats when police approached. Sitting side by side and leaning into each other as though they were searching for patterns from their own children, the matchmakers blended in seamlessly with the crowd of elderly parents until it was safe to spread their flyers back out on the pavement (see Figure 45).

The stereotyping of matchmakers as being selfish and untrustworthy echoed in my own interviews. Of the seven parents and singles I interviewed in Shanghai, no one said they would trust a matchmaker with their search. At the same time, their continued presence at every market I visited suggests that some families do use their services. I began to wonder whether newer visitors to the markets were more likely to turn to them, learning only later of the risks and stereotypes. The next case study explores how some parents actively warn others about the dangers of working with certain matchmakers.

Figure 45. *Matchmaker lays accordion-folded fliers back out after local police are out of eyesight while sweeping through the park, announcing that it is illegal to solicit services on the premises. Photo from author.*

"Greasy Uncle" - Chengdu Matchmaker

Unlike Wuhan's market, where matchmakers could openly post strings of laminated fliers advertising the singletons they represented, and advertise their businesses with large signs, Chengdu's rules were stricter. Matchmakers there had to carry their materials as a book or stacks of papers, without any signage. Unlike Shanghai, which banned all unregistered businesses, Chengdu permitted matchmakers to operate, but forced them to rely solely on their reputations and interpersonal persuasion rather than signage.

Of the five markets where I conducted research, Chengduans expressed the strongest distrust towards the professional matchmakers. Not a single person I met at the Chengdu market expressed interest in using such a service, citing concerns about greed and insincerity. One father explained:

> *The matchmakers are just profit-driven people. They don't really care about [helping you find] a partner. They're just looking for money. It's not a good way to*

begin a family. [The best method is] through the parents. You get more useful information talking to the parents directly than through the matchmaker.

Like the parents at many of the markets I attended, those in Chengdu did not come to the marriage markets to browse the fliers organized by matchmaking agencies. Instead, they came to mingle with other parents, hopeful that a spark between them might kindle one between their children as well.

Several participants specifically warned me about one particular figure they called the "Greasy Uncle."[122] At least five market-goers cautioned me about him while he was working in plain sight. For twenty RMB (about $3 USD), he sold single sheets of paper, each containing one personal ad, from his bookbag. For 10,000 RMB (about $1,400 USD), he promised to arrange five in-person dates. My interlocutors warned me in no-so-hushed tones, often with their backs to the man in direct earshot, describing explicitly who they were speaking ill of: "THAT MAN BEHIND ME IN THE WHITE SHIRT." When I looked over, I saw a man in his sixties or seventies with a pockmarked face, seated on a bench with a red bookbag worn backwards, tight against his chest. He carefully unzipped the bag, pulling out slightly crinkled A4 papers to match the details with the requests of an older woman who was speaking with him. Some people clearly did not trust him to use his services: "HE IS A BAD MAN. DO NOT TRUST HIM," more than one interlocutor told me loudly. I watched as the woman handed him a pink twenty RMB bill, clearly ignoring the warnings being issued just steps away. This explicit cautioning of the Greasy Uncle exemplifies the stereotypes of matchmakers as being deceitful.

The interaction struck me as layered with mistrust. The participants distrusted the matchmaker enough to warn everyone loudly, the warning causing me to cast suspicious glances at the man, and the man himself, who seemed mistrustful of others, protecting his files closely. His secrecy resonates with what Pettier (2019) observed at the same market over a decade earlier, where an elderly divorcee described the matchmakers' "jealously guarded cupboards full of customers' files," dynamic Pettier is linked to the social power of gatekeeping information (p. vi). Yet Chengdu's specific regulation may also have intensified this secrecy. In Wuhan, for instance, I could flip through matchmaker's books freely, but in Chengdu, the rules against signage and solicitation forced agencies to rely entirely on word-of-mouth and tightly controlled lists. I began to wonder if the city's policies themselves inadvertently reinforced distrust by restricting transparency, thus making information harder to access.

Was the mistrust specific to this one man, or did his constant presence color people's view of all matchmakers at the Chengdu market? I attended this particular market three times and each time he was there with his bookbag, making it difficult to disentangle his reputation from attitudes towards the profession more generally.

It is important to note that Chengdu's market is not devoid of signage. About a quarter of the People's Park was designated as a "marriage corner," clearly marked by thousands of uniform pink and blue fliers. The fliers, representing women and men respectively, were arranged in neat rows

[122] 油腻大叔 (yóunì dàshū) - literally "greasy uncle" - a term used to describe any middle aged man who is off-putting, physically unappealing, or morally questionable.

of 56, strung on wire lines attached to brown metal frames designed specifically for this purpose (see Figure 46). Yet, unlike Wuhan, these posts were not managed by matchmakers. Instead, they were regulated and approved by the local park authority, encouraging singles (or more likely, their parents) to advertise and matchmake for themselves. While Chengdu matchmakers were permitted to work, the banning of signage forced agents to work more discreetly and to rely on face-to-face persuasion. While "Greasy Uncle" carried a deeply negative reputation, there were other matchmakers in Chengdu who appeared to fare better under these constraints, as we will see in the following case study.

Figure 46. *Attendees read fliers at a weekly marriage market in Chengdu. The fliers are uniform and the colors correspond to the gender of the person being advertised. Photo by author.*

Mrs. Wu - Founding Agent of Chengdu Market

As far as I could understand, what was banned at Chengdu's People's Park was not the solicitation of matchmaking for hire but the advertisement of services through signage, unless approved by park authorities. One of the matchmakers I interviewed, a woman in her late sixties, played a key role in setting up this system. The very chatty Mrs. Wu's voice was almost as loud as her fashion. Her outfit glittered from head to toe, a bejeweled baseball hat displaying an enormous Western Syrian cross, a diamond-embossed black t-shirt, jeans, and open-toed jeweled wedges.

A lifelong Chengdu resident, Mrs. Wu lived a few blocks from the park. In 2013, as she was preparing for retirement, she began looking for a hobby that would also do "good for the

community.” Many of her peers at the time were parents of unmarried only-children. And like parents across China, they were gathering in public parks to find spouses for their adult children (more on this below). What began as Mrs. Wu casually helping friends soon developed into a thriving business.

Mrs. Wu collaborated with the park authority to establish what is now one of the country's most well-known “marriage corners". It is unclear whether rules restricting signage were already in place or whether Mrs. Wu helped design them to limit competition. Either way, the current system requires participants to register their fliers with the park office by submitting an ID card, proof of “true identity,”[123] and a short description of qualities, along with a 300 RMB (about $40 USD) fee for three months of display on standardized blue or pink paper. Mrs. Wu now acts as a spokesperson for the park, explaining the rules to newcomers and directing them to the proper offices. I did not ask whether she received a portion of the park’s revenue, though I suspect she may.

In addition to working with the park, Mrs. Wu runs her own business. Like many contemporary matchmakers, she maintains a large digital database on WeChat, which she claims includes more than 20,0000 singles organized across 15 groups based on income, education, or age cohorts. She registers 1,000 new participants every month. Anyone can join for free, but to access another person’s contact information requires a fee of 200 RMB (about $28 USD). In this way, her business model resembles that of the Greasy Uncle, though on a larger, digital, and more formalized scale.

Despite the profit she clearly makes, Mrs. Wu insisted throughout our conversation that she is motivated less by money than by a sense of social duty. At one point, she expressed surprise that no equivalent matchmaking system exists in the United States and suggested that I start one, joking that I “could be a billionaire.” Whether she meant it as business advice, a subtle boast about her own success, or both, the remark blurred the lines between altruism and ambition.

Unlike the Greasy Uncle, who was loudly whispered about as untrustworthy,[124] Mrs. Wu’s name did not carry public suspicion. Participants did not openly endorse her, but not one warned me away either. This contrast raises the question of whether her legitimacy was tied to her cooperation with the park authority, which made her appear more official. Did her bold persona (and style) lend to her credibility? Or were parents more trusting because she claimed measurable results? Mrs. Wu loudly boasted to me during our interview that she had successfully matched 50 couples in the past year.[125] While she said she sometimes attends weddings, she said she more often receives red envelopes from grateful couples she pairs as tokens of appreciation.

The difference between Mrs. Wu and the Greasy Uncle echoes much older patterns of Chinese matchmaking. Historically, the profession was simultaneously respected and distrusted. They were praised for playing an "essential role” in family making (Pettier, 2019, p. vi) while also being criticized for being profit-driven, as captured in the “among ten matchmakers, nine are liars”

[123] Mrs. Wu explained that a pay stub and a copy of any diplomas needed to be submitted

[124] I tried to interview him, but once he found out I was a researcher he lost interest. My research assistant and I assumed his unwillingness to participate likely had to do with the fact that a conversation with me would take time away from his ability to make a profit.

[125] I was not able to verify these claims

expression mentioned above. Mrs. Wu embodies the same tension. She frames her work as community service but profits from paywalls, referrals, and her connections to the markets organization. Unlike traditional matchmakers, who worked one-on-one with families, she operates at a larger scale through WeChat, handling thousands of clients at once. In this sense, she is a modernized version of the traditional go-between, translating the older practice of brokerage into the digital age, guarding family values while also inheriting its reputation for opportunism.

Who Trusts the Matchmakers?

Historically, matchmakers were an integral part of the marriage ritual, but today, they are often regarded as a last resort when independent efforts to find a partner fail. In my own research, most participants insisted that they have not, nor ever would use a matchmaker. Out of the thirty-four married participants I interviewed, only two said they had met their partners through a professional service, and both of them were matchmakers themselves (Mr. Chen, described above, and Mr. Fang, described in Chapter 4). For these men, presenting matchmaking as the means of their own marriages worked as a testimonial to strengthen their credibility and attract clients. The rest of the participants reported meeting their spouses through friends, work, school, or introductions arranged by family friends. Likewise, of the forty-seven parents and singles I spoke with who were actively seeking partners, only four admitted to considering using a matchmaker.

Yet, despite these denials, the number of professional agents I encountered, along with the large client lists they claimed to maintain, suggests that many people do in fact trust them. Evidence also points to the steady expansion of matchmaking services in recent years (Pettier, 2019, p. xviii). If matchmakers are stereotyped as greedy con artists, and if the client lists within Mrs. Wu's WeChat groups, Greasy Uncle's bookbag, and Mr. Chen's photo albums are genuine, then who are the people actually using these services?

One explanation for this mismatch of demand and supply is that those who pay for matchmaking services are not the same individuals who regularly attend marriage markets where I was recruiting participants. Busy professionals may prefer to outsource this task, relying on the agents to act as their children's proxies. This would explain why so few of my interviewees admitted to hiring a service. As the saying goes, "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." In this case, the absence of interviews with people who openly demand matchmaking services should not be taken as proof that such demand does not exist.

Another possible explanation involves the concept of "saving face."[126] Because of the stigma associated with professional matchmakers, some individuals may under-report their use of such services. As Jean-Baptiste Pettier (2019), notes in his work on the very same Chengdu market, hiring a professional is often perceived as "reveal[ing] a personal failure to meet a suitable partner" and thus "a potential source of shame, to be kept secret if possible" (p. xvii). These examples suggest that while my participants denied using professionals, the social stigma may have prevented them (or their parents) from speaking honestly about it.

The type of services offered may also shape the level of trust. Some agencies, such as *Love Happens by Fate* (LHBF, discussed in Chapter 4), provide personal services, scanning profiles,

[126] 保面子 (bǎo miànzi) - literally "to guard face" - maintain honor, respect, and social standing

and presenting carefully selected matches. This labor-intensive work can foster greater intimacy and trust between the client and the matchmaker. More commonly, however, matchmakers provide database access, leaving clients to sift through profiles themselves. This impersonal approach fits the stereotype of a profit-driven middleman and reinforces public cynicism. Regardless of the model, the persistence of professional matchmaking demonstrates how historical practices of mediated pairing have been adapted to new cultural and economic conditions. These services signal that contemporary Chinese society treats widespread singleness as a social problem requiring intervention. In the next section, we explore how parents go about matchmaking on their own, without the help of a middleman.

Parents' Matchmaking Themselves at Marriage Corners

As the previous section showed, professional matchmakers often use marriage markets to recruit clients and advertise their services. Yet alongside these commercial ventures, a parallel system exists that is driven less by profit and more by parental responsibility and concern. Although adult children sometimes joke that their parents are "selling them" (Gui, 2016, p. 1935), most parents I encountered at the weekly events were motivated by duty and anxiety rather than money. They viewed marriage as an essential milestone that was needed to both reach adulthood and live a "full" or "complete" life. When their sons or daughters struggled to reach this step, parents stepped in to ease the "burden" (Sun, 2012). Unlike the matchmakers with hundreds or even thousands of clients, most parents arrived with a single flier promoting the qualities of their (often) only child. While some singletons attended the markets on their own behalf, the overwhelming majority of participants were elderly parents. Together with similarly aged matchmakers, they pushed the average age of attendees well over sixty, earning these gatherings the nickname "white hair blind dating"[127] (Wong, 2014, p. 1). Despite sharing space with commercial agents, parents were motivated by the desire to secure their family line and thus fulfill filial obligations, framing singleness as a moral issue that reflected not only the individual but on the family as a whole. These concerns, combined with demographic changes and growing anxieties about singleness, laid the foundation for the emergence of China's first marriage markets.

[127] 白发相亲 (bái fà xiāngqīn) - literally "white hair blind date"

Figure 47. *Illustrations of a crowd of (mostly) parents and matchmakers at a Saturday Marriage Market in Chongqing. People are reading one another's signs and taking down phone numbers of potential matches for their single son or daughter. Illustration by author.*

Although there is some dispute, several accounts suggest that the first marriage market, as it exists in its current form, began in Beijing (Gui, 2016; Pettier, 2020).[128] In this version of the story, around 2004, retirees gathered in Longtan Park for morning exercises, including *tai chi* and dancing, and other group activities. While talking, many began complaining and worrying about their unmarried adult children and soon started informally playing matchmaker (Wong, 2014).[129] From these beginnings, the idea spread across the country, and more than twenty years later, marriage markets can now be found in parks nationwide (Gui, 2016; Pettier, 2020). During my own fieldwork, I visited markets in five cities. These events, usually held one or two times a week

[128] Others say that it started in People's Park in Shanghai. Example: Zhou, W. (2016 Aug 12). The marketplace for marriage. *China Daily* https://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-08/12/content_26457008.htm (Also see Zhang & Sun, 2014).

[129] Note: In 2004, the earliest cohort of only children born under the OCP would be 25 years old at this point, just entering an appropriate marriageable age.

year-round, are largely unstructured. Parents, matchmakers, hopeful singles, and curious spectators mingle in crowds that can range from a few hundred to over a thousand people. (Gui, 2016, p. 1932; see Figure 47).

Although parental matchmaking has deep roots in Chinese society, the rise of this particular form in the early 2000s reflects a mix of demographic, social and cultural changes. The first factor stems from the OCP, which created a significant gender imbalance and placed immense pressure on the family's "only hope" (Fong, 2004) to continue the family line. The second factor is tied to urbanization following the *Reform and Open Up* initiative of 1978. By 2011, more Chinese mainlanders were living in urban than rural areas (Rodenbiker, 2023). In earlier generations, singles would have been matched within smaller rural communities where social networks were dense and kinship ties strong. In contrast, urban life placed young adults in larger, more anonymous communities where extended family and traditional support systems were weakened (Gui, 2016). As one parent explained, in the past "everybody knows everybody, if you are at marriageable age but still single, all your friends, family, relatives and coworkers, would introduce you to potential partners" (Gui, 2016, p. 1936). Today's singletons lack those organic networks of their parent's generation. The transition from an *acquaintance society* to a *stranger society* requires new systems of matchmaking. Retired parents are especially suited to this role as they have the time to engage in the labor of searching, and bring with them a lifetime of investing energy into shaping the idealized futures of their only child (Fong, 2004). As Pettier (2020) argues, marriage markets are both a continuation of old forms of matchmaking and an adaptation to the rapid social transformations that have accompanied urbanization and the rise of China's middle class.[130]

Process of Parental Matchmaking

An ideal pairing between two parents follows a recognizable pattern. Wong (2014) outlines a five-step process that begins with quiet observation. First, parents watch from a distance, assessing other parents' overall appearance and mannerisms (p. 3). Next, they move closer and exchange greetings, using this interaction to evaluate "*yuan*"[131] or the general sense of compatibility between families (p. 4). In the third step, they engage in a detailed discussion of their children, scrutinizing individual characteristics such as education, occupation, and family background. If satisfied, the parents reveal photos of their children on their phones (see Figure 48). The fourth step involves exchanging contact information, usually WeChat, which each parent will pass on to their children. (p. 5). Finally, if both children can be persuaded to connect, they begin chatting online. Should this step go well, they ideally meet in person, fall in love, and marry, repeating the cycle for the next generation.

Although no one I spoke with during fieldwork had actually met their partners through marriage markets, this may be underreported. Using the markets, like hiring a matchmaker, is often framed as a last resort or even a personal failure, so many parents attend without their child's knowledge. In my own interviews, more than half of the parents admitted their children were unaware of their efforts. As Pettier (2020) also found, secrecy often stemmed from fear of embarrassment. Similar results appear in Tianhan Gui's (2016) study of Beijing marriage markets, where parents

[130] Pettier (2020) argues more specifically that the markets function to recreate the middle class.

[131] 缘 (yuán) - "predestined affinity" or relational bond that shapes whether two individuals are meant to meet, connect, and sustain a relationship.

sometimes lied about how they came to know a suitor, presenting the connection as through a friend rather than admitting it was actually facilitated by a market, broker, or flier (p. 1935). A mother I interviewed in Wuhan shared that she tells her son the prospective matches are her "friends' children" and he "never asks" for further details.

The instinct to conceal matchmaking efforts was echoed by many singletons themselves. Like Wong's (2014) participants, most of the singletons I interviewed disliked the idea of their parents becoming involved in their romantic lives (more on this in Chapter 4). In Shanghai, I met a fellow unmarried PhD candidate in his late 30s who laughed as he told me he was certain his mother did not know about marriage markets, and that he intended to keep it that way: "or else she would be here every Saturday." When I asked why, he said that he would be embarrassed to know his details were on display in public and ashamed if he was unable to find a partner independently. His comments illustrate how shame and pride intersect with familial duty, creating tensions between parental involvement and their adult children's sense of autonomy.

Figure 48. *One mother shows photos of her single child to the father of another singleton. The two discuss their children's assets and decide if they would like to exchange phone numbers so their adult children might eventually meet. Illustration by author.*

The Fliers - Advertisements for Single Adult Children

Marriage markets varied widely from city to city, both in layout and organization. In Chengdu, for example, fliers were hung by the park authorities and left on display around the clock, which

allowed parents to advertise their children even when they were not present (see Figure 46 above). In other cities like Shanghai and Chongqing, park rules prohibited the hanging of fliers altogether. In those contexts, parents (or the matchmakers they hired) had to be physically present to display signs (or books) in order for the singleton's information to be seen.

Each city developed its own creative methods. In Chongqing, a vertical city full of stairs, laminated fliers were arranged in neat rows along the steps, sometimes held by parents like airport greeters (see Figure 49) and sometimes worn as placards hanging from their necks. In Shanghai, where public posting was prohibited, and unlicensed agents could not solicit services, parents often placed their (often) unlaminated fliers across rigid luxury shopping bags (see Figure 50). This solution kept the paper clean but also signaled the child's symbolic value by preventing others from stepping on it. The lack of lamination made the paper more vulnerable to wrinkles and soiling, which also signaled the elevated status of the families presenting the information. They could afford the time and money to print crisp new sheets before every market. In all the markets I visited, parents found similar ways to display their fliers, such as clipping them to foldable grocery carts (visible in Figure 44 above) or to open umbrellas (see Figure 51).[132] Less common but still noticeable were fliers taped to cell phone tripods that towered above the others (see Figure 52).

[132] The umbrella technique was pervasive in the visual images of marriage markets that circulated in the international press over the last decade. Example: https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/chinas-marriage-market

Figure 49. *Two parents holding fliers advertising their adult children, passively waiting to be approached by interested parents at a marriage market in Chongqing. Illustration by author.*

Figure 50. *Illustrations of bags used to display personal ads at a weekly marriage market in Shanghai. Photo and illustration by author.*

Figure 51. *Fliers for singletons attached to umbrellas at a marriage market in Wuhan. This method of displaying fliers was made popular at a marriage market in Shanghai, and has since grown popular elsewhere. The umbrella on the left displays a single flier, likely left by a parent, while the umbrella on the right displays 5 fliers, each representing a different singleton, possibly left by a small-time matchmaker (not an agency) who only represents a few clients at a time. Photo by author.*

Figure 52. *A father sits next to his flyer advertising his single son at a marriage market in Chongqing. The flier is clipped to a cellphone tripod and towers over the other fliers lying across the riser next to him on either side. Across from the man is another flyer that has also been attached to a tripod, but the paper is poster-sized with no parent present. Just out of frame is a flier attached to an umbrella. Illustration by author.*

The spatial organization of marriage markets also reflected local variations. Parents usually stood quietly behind their fliers, waiting for others to approach. In some markets, areas of the park were grouped by categories such as age, gender, income level, or place of residence. Shanghai, the most famous marriage market, included a section for singles living abroad, where parents hoped to find international partners who still had Shanghai *hukous.* In Chongqing, where space is constrained by the city's mountainous terrain, days were divided by marital status. Never-married singles were advertised on Saturdays, while Sundays were reserved for divorcees.

Most fliers followed a standard format that included the following details:

gender	性别
month and year of birth	出生年
registered hukou	户口所在地
height & weight	身高 & 体重
educational level / specialties studied	学历/ 所学专业
occupation	职业
salary & financial situation	工资收入 & 经济状况
dwelling	住房
property and goods (car/apartment)	车房情况
marital status & (if divorced:) dependent children	婚姻状况 & 离婚： 子女归属

While nearly all fliers presented basic information, only some listed requirements for a future partner. Parents who believed their child was a strong candidate in the marriage market often used bold demands. For example, I once saw a father holding a sign for his highly-educated, high-earning son that specified that his son was seeking a woman with "no ex-boyfriends" and who was "a virgin," both written in large letters at the bottom. Parents who felt their child had fewer advantages tended to omit requirements. A New York Times reporter quoted one parent at a Beijing market explaining why his flier had no conditions: "We don't have much choice … at this point, we can't rule anybody out."[133] The contrast between these examples highlights the underlying market logic of the fliers. Just like in systems of trade, the perceived value of a singleton determined the demands parents could make, while those seen as "less valuable" were forced to accept greater compromise.

[133] Larmer, B. (2013 Mar 19). The Price of Marriage in China. *New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/business/in-a-changing-china-new-matchmaking-markets.html

Occasionally, fliers also included the following details:

appearance	身材
state of health	身体状况
character[134]	性格
temperament	外表气质
hobbies and interests[135]	爱好
family's place of residence	家住方位

Somewhere between a resume, a stats sheet, and an advertisement, these details are meant "to define a social status rather than an individual personality" (Pettier, 2019, p. ix). Most fliers consist entirely of text, visually reminiscent of the "big character posters"[136] used during the Mao era for protest and political mobilization (Yu & Barr, 2011, p. 15-19). Many parents attending today's marriage markets came of age during the Cultural Revolution and likely remember the power of handwritten posters to shape reputations and inspire social change (see Figure 53).

[134] Often expressed simply as either 内向 (nèixiàng) "introverted" or 外向 (wàixiàng) "extraverted"

[135] Often listed at "bad" habits the individual does NOT have: 不赌博 (bù dǔbó) "does not gamble" or 不吸烟 (bù xīyān) "does not smoke." More on this in Chapter 4

[136] 大字报 (dàzì bào) - "big-character posters"

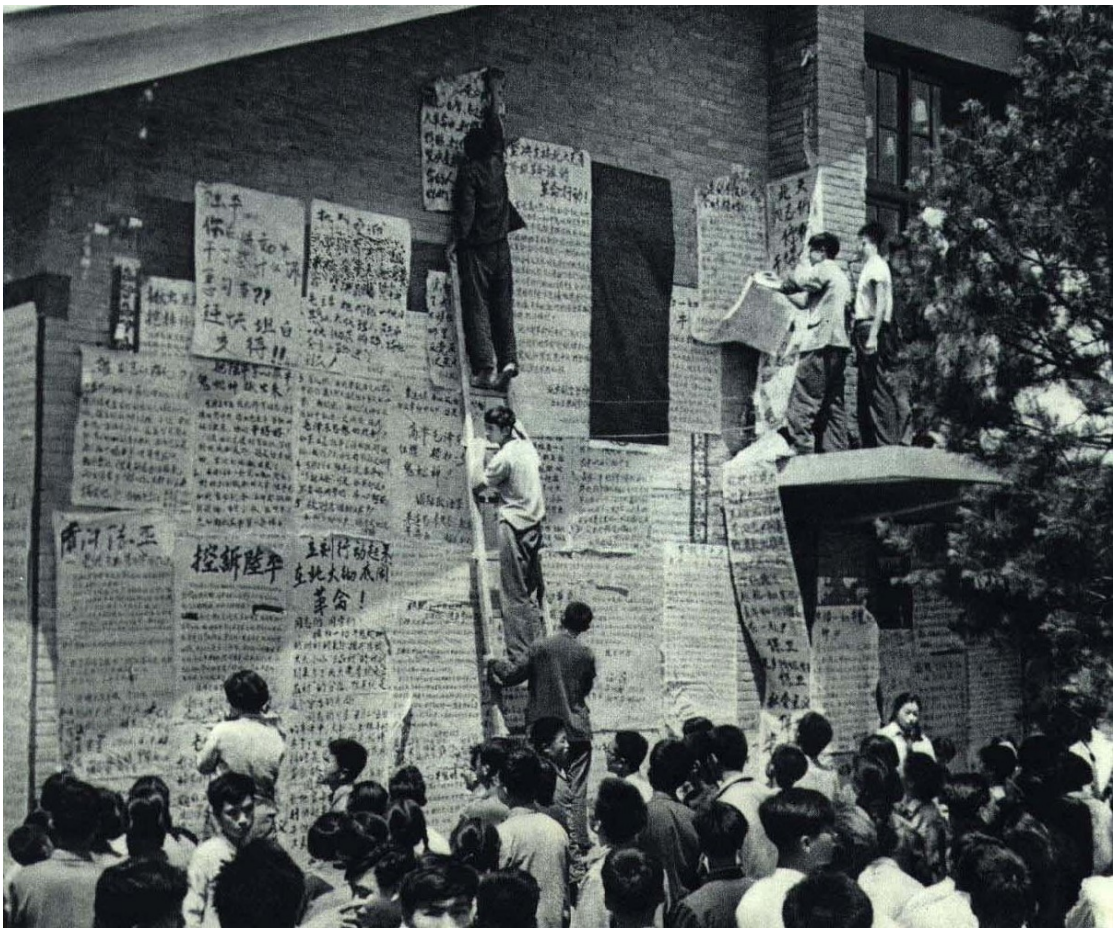

Figure 53. *Example of Big Character Poster from the Cultural Revolution. People's Pictorial. (1967, November 30). Beijing University big-character posters [Photograph].* Wikimedia Commons. *https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1967-11_1967年_北京大学大字报.jpg*

The content, of course, differs. Whereas "big character posters" accused people of counterrevolutionary activities, marriage market fliers advertise unmarried men and women. Yet both forms draw attention to individuals who have failed to conform to dominant expectations. In this sense, marriage fliers are also political. They reflect a cultural logic in which singleness is treated as a moral problem that must be solved. (or even eradicated). Viewed in this way, the displays can be read as propaganda produced by the system I have taken to calling "Big Marriage."

Photographs

While contemporary matchmaking industries like online dating (see Chapter 4) rely heavily on photos, parents at the marriage markets usually reveal photos only after progressing through the first three steps of the vetting process. One report suggests that withholding photographs initially allows parents to focus on "values and shared goals, rather than fleeting impressions."[137] As a non-native speaker who reads Chinese slowly, I found that this text-based visual environment made the few images I encountered stand out all the more.

[137] Keepfer, G. (2024 Feb 13). Blossoming Connections: Exploring China's Marriage Markets. *Wild China.* https://wildchina.com/2024/02/blossoming-connections-exploring-chinas-marriage-markets/

Parents who cannot regularly attend markets may use photos to help their child's profile gain engagement when they are not present to advocate in person. In Wuhan, I noticed one such example. Amid more than one hundred uniform blue fliers with text, a single laminated sheet caught my eye because a portrait had been taped to its corner (see Figure 54). The flier represented a man listed as A686, whose information was displayed by Mr. Chen's agency, *Heavenly Fate Matchmaking*, reads:

> *A686. Man. Born 1989 (34 years old). 175 cm tall [5'9"]. 58 kg [128 lbs.]. Owns house and car. Profession: Inspector. Hukou: Wuhan.*
>
> *LOOKING FOR: Unmarried girl born after 1995 [28 or younger]. 160 cm [5'3"] or above. Local Wuhan only-child. Good looking and good tempered.*
>
> *ABOUT ME: I have a bachelor's degree and a salary over 120,000 yuan [about $17,000 USD]. I am an inspector at a pharmaceutical company and a high school math teacher. I own multiple houses. My parents are both healthy and retired. My family's combined annual income is 250,000-300,000 yuan (about $35,000 - $42,000 USD).*[138]

Among the many rows of uniform fliers, A686's stood out because of its photograph. Out of hundreds of postings, I counted only two with images at the market that particular day. Both photos were clearly added afterward, as evidenced by the fact that neither had been integrated into the original design and looked improvised. This led me to suspect that the parents, rather than the agency, had attended the market and manually attached the photographs to their child's flier. A photo offered an inexpensive way for families who relied on intermediaries to increase visibility and prevent their child's profile from being overlooked. A686's photo was taped firmly to his flier, while the other I observed was fastened only by a single paperclip, ready to blow away in a strong wind.

The effect of adding an image was striking. Although the details of A686's profile were not particularly impressive, I nonetheless paused to read his entire profile and noticed other market goers doing the same. While his income is slightly above average, it is less than that of some of his peers nearby.[139] A younger, taller man with double his salary had a flyer directly above him (slightly to the right). A686's photograph, however, commands attention and differentiates him from the many faceless profiles around him.

Looking back now, I also notice that the photo had been placed directly over the section of the flier that listed his "family situation." Since being an only child is an important detail in Wuhan's marriage market (especially for men, as I will discuss in Chapter 4), I wondered whether the photo was positioned deliberately to conceal this fact. At the time, I did not think to lift the image to see

[138] I am unsure if the combined salary is of his parents or also includes himself.

[139] The average income in Wuhan for 2023 was 103,000 RMB [about $14,000 USD] according to https://teamedupchina.com/average-salary-in-wuhan-china/#:~:text=Average%20Salary%20in%20Wuhan%3A%20Local%20HR%20Data,-Wuhan%20Salary%20Data&text=The%20above%20photo%20shows%20the,(%241%2C208%20USD)%2Fmonth

what lay underneath. If intentional, this tactic would suggest that the photograph was not only a way to attract attention but also a tool for strategically obscuring less desirable details.

Figure 54*. In a sea of blue fliers for single men at a marriage market in Wuhan, one stands out. Taped to the top right corner of one of the fliers is a portrait of a polished young man in a white lab coat over a white collared shirt and a tie. His uniform flier is from a matchmaking agency called* Heavenly Fate Matchmaking*. Photo by author.*

This example demonstrates the symbolic power of images in markets otherwise dominated by text. A photograph collapses multiple layers of meaning, personalizing an otherwise impersonal stats sheet. It can also signal health, class, and respectability while also conveying "face", or social status, for both parent and child. At the same time, as with the case of A686, it can be used to highlight or obscure less desirable traits, thereby shaping how others interpret the singleton's social value. Scholars of Chinese culture often emphasize the importance of "face" in social interactions (Fincher, 2014; Pettier, 2019; Yang, 2010), and here we see how photographs provide a tool for managing face by making a child appear more desirable while deflecting attention from potential shortcomings. In this sense, photographs at marriage markets can function as both an attention-grabbing device and an instrument for reputation, or "face" management, aligning with broader logics of morality and parental responsibility.

Subconscious Messaging at Markets

Much like the parallels between the fliers and the Mao-era big character posters, I noticed other visuals that seemed to act as subconscious messages from "Big Marriage." At the weekly markets, the environment itself reinforced norms of Chinese partnership and promoted a sense that singleness was abnormal or undesirable. One of the markets in Wuhan, which I attended the most, was particularly abundant with anti-singleness propaganda.

The most obvious visual message was the strict gender binary and accompanying heteronormativity. In Wuhan, as in Chengdu, the flier system was color-coded: pink for women, blue for men.[140] Parents could only browse for a son or daughter-in-law within these two categories. Even when parents brought their own handwritten signs that lacked color, they began with the characters for 男 (*nán*) "man" or 女 (*nǚ*) "woman." Nowhere did I see signs that suggested alternative gender options or relationship models beyond pairing one man and one woman. Pettier (2020) similarly observed that, "non-heterosexual or non-cisgender people are generally invisible in these gatherings" (p. 19).

This exclusion was not surprising given broader political and cultural contexts. While Taiwan legalized same-sex marriage in 2019, the PRC remains conservative and has not sanctioned queer unions (Engebretsen, 2014; Miller, 2023; Wang, 2019). Some parents have tried to intervene on behalf of their queer children, but such efforts have been few and met with resistance.[141] For example, in 2017, the American publication Sixth Tone reported that on the Chinese holiday of "Lover's Day," parents of queer singletons staged a takeover of Shanghai's marriage market.[142] They traveled as far as Shenzhen (1,200 kilometers away), only to be met with hostility. According to the report, the crowd grew angry, police were called, and the gathering was shut down within an hour. Both public opinion and state policy remain aligned in limiting visibility in relationships that are outside the frame of heteronormativity, which explains why I did not encounter any openly queer face-to-face matchmaking during my fieldwork.

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[140] One agency at the Wuhan market did use the occasional yellow flier, although I could not figure out the meaning behind the color, as they were equally men and women. Only a handful of these yellow fliers existed on one of the several dozen walls of fliers.

[141] Pettier (2020) cites this YouTube video as an example: https://youtu.be/pJX8zrsSU7c

[142] Bhandari, B. (2017 May 20). At Wedding Market, Mothers of Gays and Lesbians Face Resistance. *Sixth Tone.* https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1000233

The spatial arrangement at one Wuhan market I attended most also created subtle messages about the inevitability of marriage. The marriage corner was set between a wooded stream and a convenience store, yet less than ten feet from the rows of fliers, local photographers regularly staged wedding photoshoots. Although the park spans over one hundred acres with diverse landscapes, couples often posed right beside the marriage corner. During my eight visits to this market, I saw brides in full gowns on five occasions. The juxtaposition was striking. On one side of a knee-high wall, elderly mothers bartering over potential in-laws, while just steps away, photographers directed newlyweds into romantic poses (see Figure 55). Even if unintentional, the proximity reinforced the message that marriage was the desired endpoint, a reminder to all the market goers of what the effort was supposed to lead to.

Figure 55. *Two elderly parents discuss their single adult children at a weekly marriage market in a park in Wuhan. Behind them, a newlywed couple takes their wedding portrait. A visual reminder to market goers of what their efforts are intended to produce. Photo by author.*[143]

At the opposite end of the market stood a convenience store with an entire wall covered by a mural. Unlike the fliers, this image contained no text. The painting depicted a young couple, a man and a woman, with their three children in a park (see Figure 56). The woman, dressed in business attire yet also carrying a picnic basket, embodied the dual responsibilities of wage-earning and domestic caregiving expected of the contemporary Chinese mother/wife. The man, casually dressed in athletic wear, carried the youngest child on his shoulders, leading the family while also positioned slightly behind his children to emphasize his role as a provider and protector.

[143] Note: The green text to the top right reads: friendly reminder: do not believe in predestined marriage

Figure 56. *Two mothers chat between a mural of a happy young couple with three children and pink fliers advertising available single women at a Wuhan marriage market. Photo by author.*

The image projects an idealized Chinese family, complete with three children. My fieldwork in 2023 took place just two years after China introduced its three-child policy in an attempt to boost birthrates (Yang et al., 2023). Surveys suggest that only about five percent of women intend to have three children (p. 6), yet the mural serves as visual propaganda, encouraging market goers to imagine that family size as the norm. Much like a shopping mall pumps the smell of pizza into its air vents to entice shoppers toward the food court, Wuhan's marriage market was infused with subtle cues promoting heterosexual coupling, marriage, and procreation. In every direction, visuals reminded parents of the cultural expectations they were helping to enforce upon their children.

Parental Involvement Success Rates

Given how common marriage markets are across urban China, one might expect parental matchmaking to yield many successful marriages. Yet studies consistently show that success rates are very low. No definitive numbers exist, but existing research suggests that the marital status of either gender is not changing in any significant way as a result of the markets (Pettier, 2022; Wong, 2014). Peidong Sun (2012) also found that very few marriages were the direct outcome of these events. During her ten months of fieldwork at the highly publicized People's Park in Shanghai,

she identified only one successful couple. In a later interview with the Shanghai's *Oriental Morning Post*, Sun explained the lack of results as stemming from "the fact that people try to solve emotional problems with a market approach."[144] This points to a broader tension of treating intimacy as a tradable commodity which may undermine its very possibility.

In rural areas, parental matchmaking has higher success rates, though the dynamics differ. These communities do not typically hold large public marriage corners. Instead, parents rely on long-standing local networks to arrange introductions (Huang et al, 2015; Pozen, 2013; Sun, 2012). But more matches do not necessarily mean better outcomes. Huang et al. (2015) found that rural parental involvement often benefited parents more than their children, particularly in securing elder care and social security in later life. These arrangements tended to prioritize a submissive wife and reinforce parental interference even after marriage (p. 26). Couples arranged this way reported higher household incomes, but also lower marital harmony. This raises questions about how success is measured. Is it marriage itself or the quality and sustainability of the relationship that matters?

Urban dynamics tell a different story. Higher incomes and greater financial independence mean that singletons face less pressure to marry for economic survival. Chan & Chen (2024) found that financially stable singles were more likely to reject parental matchmaking altogether (p. 49).[145] They also noted that couples arranged primarily around financial considerations were more likely to divorce (ibid). These findings align with my own fieldwork. Even among participants who were already married, none reported meeting their partners through parental arrangement via a marriage market. While it is possible that some were reluctant to admit it (perhaps to save face), my evidence suggests that the majority of urban singletons are not directly benefiting from their parent's efforts.

Then Why Do It?

If marriage markets are not particularly successful in reducing singleness, why are they so popular? The reasons appear to be less about generating matches and more about what the gatherings provide for parents themselves, especially in terms of mental health and social well-being.

Many parents may simply be unaware of the low success rates. Since there is no systematic data or published statistics available, they rely on hearsay and the claims of matchmakers. For regular attendees, the disappearance of familiar faces can easily be interpreted as evidence of success. If someone no longer comes to the park, anxious parents may assume their child found a spouse, when in reality the absence might have nothing to do with matchmaking. I did not directly ask about this during fieldwork, but the possibility is consistent with how uncertainty can fuel hope. In this sense, the absence of evidence becomes a kind of imagined proof for worried parents.

For many parents, the markets offer friendship and community. At the events I attended most often, particularly in Chengdu and Wuhan, I saw the same parents every week, chatting, venting, and

[144] Sun, J. (2024 July 10). Lonely Hearts Transformed: The Evolution of Chinese Marriage Advertisements. The World of Chinese. https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2024/07/lonely-hearts-transformed-the-evolution-of-chinese-marriage-advertisements/

[145] Note: this study focused on urban women specifically.

sharing updates. They came together in small groups, and several told me they had first met at the park. In this way, the markets doubled as a form of social club for retirees. Much like the group activities common in Chinese parks like Taiichi, kite flying, or dance (see Huang, 2016) from which the markets originally emerged, the weekly events provide another avenue for elders to gather around shared concerns. Journalists have noted that even if marriages do not come from the labor, "parent-to-parent" relationships blossom in these spaces.[146]

Marriage markets also give retirees something meaningful to do. Chen and Tong (2021) found that parents often view their children's marital status as an "important source of social integration" for which they feel responsible (p. 1195). Investing time and energy into matchmaking provides them with a sense of purpose and reduces feelings of meaninglessness that can accompany retirement. Parents who no longer work and do not have grandchildren to care for, a common social expectation for Chinese elders post-retirement (Hu & Chen, 2019; Keimig, 2021; Zhang, 2020), can redirect their energies into this project. The cultural expectation of a normative life course amplifies this sense of obligation and turns their child's singleness into a personal mission.

These gatherings also function as an outlet for parental anxiety. Scholars have noted that collective meetings help to "ease anxieties" about their children's singleness (Chan & Chen, 2024; Pettier, 2019; Sun, 2012; Zhang & Sun, 2014). I would go further to suggest that they resemble informal group therapy. By sharing their worries with others in the same situation, parents can process feelings of helplessness and at least feel like they are doing something to resolve their problems. Pettier (2020) adds that the suppression of political discourse in China may intensify this phenomenon. Parents cannot openly critique the structural conditions that contribute to the singleness epidemic, but they can grieve and process these personal consequences together (p. 16). In this sense, the weekly meetings resemble support groups like *Alcoholics Anonymous*, reframing singleness as a social struggle that needs to be overcome through the collective support of a community.

Parents also view their presence as a way to protect their children's dignity. Since many young adults dislike the idea of publicly advertising themselves, parents' involvement creates a protective social shield, helping them to "save face". Zhang and Sun (2014) note that parents act as a "buffer zone for their [child's] dignity" (p. 136). One father I met in Chongqing had tried to convince his son to attend the market on his own, but the son was too shy to talk to people and felt embarrassed that he had not yet found a partner at the age of thirty-eight. The same father tried to sell his son's introverted nature positively, noting that his fear of talking to others meant that he would be unlikely to stray. This example highlights how parental participation can not only mitigate their child's shame but also rebrand perceived character flaws as signs of moral reliability.

Finally, for those adult children who are open to parental involvement, the markets can serve as a first round of screening potential candidates. Zhang & Sun (2014) found that this arrangement lets parents help without completely removing their children's autonomy (p. 136). I saw clear evidence of this during fieldwork. In Shanghai, I met a mother of twin sons in their mid-thirties. One son was married with a child, while the other was single and still living at home. She worried that his "advanced age" would leave him alone if she did not intervene, explaining that he was too busy working to look for dates. She confessed her fears that he compared himself to his brother and felt

[146] (Keepfer, 2024)

like a failure. Whether or not her son actually shared these feelings, her projection showed how deeply she identified with his marital status. For her, finding a spouse for her son was as much about being a good mother as it was about fulfilling her son's filial duty. Only a parent profoundly invested in her children would devote this level of care and effort.

Emerging Platforms for Parents

Although marriage markets remain the most visible and well-documented form of contemporary parental matchmaking, other platforms have begun to emerge that serve the same purpose. Some of these require higher levels of technological literacy than others. For example, as I discuss in Chapter 5, the mother of one participant took to the Chinese social media app *Douyin* to advertise her daughter (see Figure 57). Her videos mimicked the presentations typically performed in person at marriage markets, but in this case were recorded digitally and made available for asynchronous viewing by other parents. Other parents have migrated to dating apps with varying degrees of creativity.

Figure 57*. Photo of Lily and June's mother seeking a husband for her eldest daughter on social media platform* Douyin*. Photo from author.*

Some parents log into mainstream dating platforms posing as their own children (Lake, 2018, p. 63). Others prefer newer apps designed specifically for parental matchmaking. Platforms with names like *Perfect-in-Law*, *Family-Building Matchmaking*,[147] and *Parents Matchmaking* have appeared in recent years, all structured to allow parents to connect through profiles of their children.[148] *Perfect-in-Law*, lauded in 2020, claimed as of 2023 to have facilitated 53,000 marriages among its two million users (see Figure 58). Much like matchmaking agencies, the app requires a paid subscription to browse profiles and unlock contact information. Unlike marriage brokers, however, the subscriptions do not expire. The company advertises that access continues "until there is marriage," according to the terms of service. A basic subscription costs 1,299 RMB

[147] https://chengjiaxiangqin.cn/

[148] Zhou, V. (2023 Aug 3). Desperate Chinese parents are joining dating apps to marry off their adult children. *The Rest of The World.* https://restofworld.org/2023/parent-facing-matchmaking-apps-china/

(about $181 USD). Despite these bold claims, many remain skeptical. One scholar from Fudan University told a reporter that "I think parents are just entertaining themselves."[149] Regardless of whether or not these reported success rates are accurate, the existence of such apps shows the extent to which parental anxiety about their children's marital futures fuels experimentation with new pathways to their goals.

Figure 58. *Advertisements for the app* Perfect-In-Laws*, which allows parents to match with other parents in search of a son or daughter-in-law.* *https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1017358*

Another emerging alternative is televised dating shows. While the entertainment format of pairing couples is not unique to China, producers have adapted it to reflect Chinese cultural concerns by involving parents directly in the process. The show *Chinese Dating with Parents*,[150] which first aired in 2016, centers the parents rather than the main contestant (see Figure 59). Parents select a potential in-law for their family while their unmarried child waits backstage, hoping their parents' choice aligns with their own desires. This format satirizes the dynamic of the marriage markets, transforming the generational mismatch into a spectacle for entertainment.

[149] Fan, Y. & Chen, Z. (2025 Jul 16). We Do: On China's New Dating Apps, Parents Make the Match. *Sixth Tone*. https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1017358

[150] 中国式相亲 (zhōngguó shì xiāngqīn) - "Chinese-Style Bling Dating"

Figure 59. *A screenshot from the dating show 'Chinese Dating' in which the mother of a single man describes her ideal DIL. This episode was broadcast on Dec. 24, 2016. Yin. Y. (2018 Sept 17). Heartbreak and Hormones: A History of China's TV Matchmaking.* Sixth Tone. *https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1002925*

Taken together, the rise of these digital platforms demonstrates that parental matchmaking is not confined to the physical spaces of parks but has adapted to new cultural and technological environments. Whether social media, dating apps, or national television, the central figure remains the anxious parent who takes responsibility for guiding their children toward marriage. These platforms extend the same logic as the marriage markets, and like the mural or photoshoots, add to the visual atmosphere, reinforcing the cultural message that marriage is not simply a personal choice but a social obligation. For those in areas that do not yet have marriage markets, such innovations allow parents to participate in the national activity of engaging in their children's marital futures. Such outlets further amplify the subliminal message that in contemporary China, marriage remains essential to becoming a complete adult and a filial child.

Parental Intervention Conclusion

Parents have long been central to marriage arrangements in Chinese marriage, but modern marriage laws require that children have a say in whom they marry. As legal frameworks and cultural norms shift, the forms of parental involvement have adapted to accommodate greater individual choice (Chan & Chen 2024, p. 32). Rather than selecting spouses outright, many families now take a more collaborative approach, with parents prescreening potential candidates before introducing them to their adult children, who ultimately make the final decision.

Some parents still rely on professional matchmakers, a group experiencing a resurgence not only in China but across Asia (Pettier, 2019, p. xv). Yet these intermediaries differ from their traditional predecessors. Their massive client lists mean services are often impersonal, which has led to suspicions that agents are more motivated by profit than by care for their clients. Although many

boast high success rates, this study was not able to verify such claims. Distrust of the profession remains widespread, as shown in the case of the "Greasy Uncle."

Others prefer to work without intermediaries, using newly emerging outlets. Tech-savvy parents have begun to experiment with social media platforms like *Douyin* or even dating apps designed specifically for parents, while those in large urban areas who prefer face-to-face interactions turn to marriage markets. These markets, relatively recent inventions, address the fragmentation of close-knit social networks brought about by rapid urbanization. While the success of such events is low, their popularity remains high, suggesting that worried elders find benefits beyond simply securing a spouse for their children.

As earlier chapters have shown, arranged marriages for sons are particularly pressing because marriage marks the transition into virtuous manhood. Parents themselves also gain virtue when their children marry, fulfilling their filial duty to "uphold honor for the family" (Lin, 2018, p. 2). Under Confucian ideals, continuing the ancestral line and securing relationships with in-laws of similar standing are core moral duties (p. 13). Modern demographic challenges, economic insecurities, and the limited availability of social security for the elderly intensify these concerns, making parents deeply invested in their children's marriage.

Even when no marriage results, the act of attending markets offers parents a sense of purpose and serves as a therapeutic outlet for collective worry. Yet these efforts often clash with adult children's growing agency. Young people today have more freedom to choose their own partners, "even if their decisions may frustrate family harmony" (Lin et al., 2019, p. 35). Generational mismatches in what constitutes an ideal spouse further deepen tensions (Chan & Chen, 2024, p. 42). For children who lack the time or social networks to find a partner, and for parents desperate to see their child married before they die, the marriage markets and/or hiring matchmakers represent two solutions to the moral and social problem of adult singleness.

Parental matchmaking in contemporary China should not be understood simply as an outdated practice stubbornly resisting modernization. It is a living institution, one that adapts to new technologies, shifting demographics, and changing cultural norms while retaining its moral weight. Marriage markets and related platforms reveal the persistence of marriage as a non-negotiable social expectation and show how parental anxieties continue to fuel creative, sometimes desperate attempts to solve the problem of singleness. As these practices evolve they are likely to remain both a site of intergenerational negotiation and a powerful reminder of how deeply embedded marriage remains to the cultural imagination of family and state.

My extended time at these markets prompted me to think about how they may evolve in the future. Chengdu's centralized system of flyer display suggests that more systematic data organization could make parental matching more efficient. If combined with algorithmic sorting, similar to dating apps, such systems could streamline the process for both parents and singletons, resulting in higher success rates. Parents and matchmakers I spoke with found the idea compelling, but admitted they lacked the technological skills to implement it. One elderly father explained that his generation grew up in a time when higher education was devalued, leaving them ill-equipped to navigate digital systems. This points to a possible trajectory for the markets themselves. As the next generation of parents arrives with higher levels of education and greater digital literacy, the

marriage market may adopt increasingly hybrid forms that blend traditional face-to-face encounters with digital infrastructures of matchmaking.

It's also important to recognize that the story unfolding in urban marriage markets does not represent the experience of singleness across China. These events are largely confined to major cities, populated by a privileged class often described as the "three highs"[151] for their high education, high wage, high age (more on this in Chapter 5). Participants tend to be among the best-educated and most career-driven, concentrated in urban centers of capital and privilege (Pettier, 2020, p. 5). While some smaller cities have begun to request their own matchmaking corners,[152] the realities of rural singleness are likely very different and fall beyond the scope of this project.

For the Chinese parents I spoke with, however, allowing their children to remain single was not an option. When asked when they would stop attending markets, most responded, "I'll stop looking once they are married." This relentless determination underscores the centrality of marriage to both individual and familial identity. Fortunately, it is not only parents who are looking. The next chapter turns to the industries that have emerged to help singletons take charge of their own romantic lives, often without parental involvement.

[151] 三高 (san gao) - three highs

[152] Via China Desk [Lianhe Zaobao] [translation by Chong, G. & Loo, J.].(2024 Apr 9). 'Granny Wang's Matchmaking': A large-scale dating arena for China's youths. *Think China*. https://www.thinkchina.sg/society/granny-wangs-matchmaking-large-scale-dating-arena-chinas-youths