Women with Money, Women with Minds: Social Status, Gender and Marriage Choices among Elite Urban Women in Contemporary China

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I declare that this thesis is the result of my own original work.

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the relationship between social status, gender and marriage choices in urban China today, with a specific focus on highly educated and high-income women. The fieldwork research included in-depth interviews with 70 women in Beijing, 35 of whom hold or are in the midst of attaining a PhD, and 35 of whom are professional or business women who earn over 5,000 RMB per month. The interviews probed their romantic choices and marriageability, examining the factors that affect their decision-making and the ways in which they describe and justify their personal life courses.

The research findings are set against popular Chinese discourses which suggest that high-status Chinese women are undesirable as wives and, as a consequence, largely remain single. Chapter 3 examines the content of these discourses and discusses the social norms and values that underpin them.

The research shows that, contrary to the stereotype portrayed in the discourses, a high proportion of the highly educated and high-income women are married or in serious relationships. However, their personal life courses tend to vary slightly from the norm as a consequence of several interrelated factors. First, the time spent studying or establishing a career tends to delay marriage and motherhood. Second, changing views on love and on relationships encourage these women to seek emotional satisfaction in a relationship tailored to their needs rather than marriage for the sake of it. Finally, economic independence plays an important role in increasing the likelihood of a non-normative personal life course, as it allows these women to give effect to their views about the true purpose of relationships.

As a case study this dissertation contributes to an understanding of contemporary urban Chinese sexual, gender, and familial norms. It also broadens our understanding of the role of the educated middle class at the forefront of changes in lifestyles and in the reshaping of intimate relationships.
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