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

Meiling Southwell-Lee

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

Meiling Southwell-Lee

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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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Chapter 1: Introduction

Beginnings

In late 2003, having just begun my PhD program, I travelled to Beijing to undertake nine months of full-time language study. It was the second time I had lived in China. I brought with me the requisite home comforts, some reading material, and what I thought were the beginnings of my PhD topic. But my experiences during this period of language study not only provided me with a better grasp of the Chinese language, they also pointed my research in an entirely new direction.

As a young woman undertaking a PhD program, I soon found that my identity and status was something of a curiosity – perhaps even something of a concern. Almost every time that someone I met asked me what I did in my home country, and I told them that I was doing my PhD, they seemed perturbed. “Don’t you want to get married?”, people asked. “Oh, you’re one of the Third Sex”, they would say knowingly.

These frequent exchanges left me confused, amused and interested. It seemed there was a popular saying in China that there were three sexes in the world – men, women and women with PhDs. These women, it was said, were unmarrigeable – and therefore apparently not real women. Women said men felt too challenged by a superior wife. Men countered that these women were
too proud and too picky. Very few people questioned the idea that women with PhDs were disproportionately single.

The accidental discovery of this saying led me to formulate a number of questions on this idea of the ‘Third Sex’, including where the saying came from, how it spread, why female PhD students and graduates had become the targets of such a discourse, and what it said about ideas of gender, educational attainment, and marriageability in China. The question also arose of what larger trends this was indicative of, and what other groups might share this ‘unmarriageable’ reputation. Was it a question of ‘status’, such that when a women achieved ‘too much’ in a specific, traditionally male-dominated domain, they became subject to discourses which sought to put them ‘back in their place’?

This questioning spawned two specific lines of inquiry, which came to drive my dissertation research. Firstly, if a contemporary Chinese woman is of high status economically or educationally, is this perceived to affect the range of romantic choices available to her? Secondly, what kinds of romantic options do these women have, what choices do they make, and why? In seeking to find answers to these two questions this dissertation investigates the relationship between status, gender and marriage choices in urban China today. As a case study it contributes to our understanding of contemporary urban Chinese society and of how social change occurs in that context in two important ways. It investigates current sexual, gender, and relationship norms, including the relationship between media representations and these changing norms, answering the questions: which types of women are considered desirable, which undesirable, and why? It also broadens our understanding of the role of the sections of the middle class at the forefront of changes in gender norms, sexual practices, and relationships in China. It opens up a discussion of the
personal opportunities available to women of this social stratum, the choices that they are making, and the factors affecting these choices.

Themes in the literature

Gender norms and the family

There is a substantial body of literature on the perceived and actual position(s) of women in modern China. Harriet Evans provides us with analyses of modern womanhood in relation to wifehood in her essay “Past, Perfect or Imperfect: Changing Images of the Ideal Wife”¹ and in her 1997 book Women and Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949.² One of the major contributions Evans has been credited with “has been to point out and document that there is more continuity between gender norms in the reform era and the previous decades than was often assumed; in fact, the enthusiasm for the break with the past was a rhetorical strategy in the critique of the Maoist period, particularly the period of the Cultural Revolution.”³ Evans notes that at the root of this is the idea that “gender is a naturally ordained set of characteristics and attributes corresponding to biological functions”, ⁴ elaborating that ‘female’, in the Chinese view,

is defined by a series of innate and essential characteristics associated with certain responses, needs, and capacities that naturally make women wives and mothers. Wifehood, and its invariable expression in

⁴ Evans, 'Past, Perfect or Imperfect: Changing Images of the Ideal Wife', p. 335.
motherhood, is the relational and biological state in which women find their truest expression. ... marriage sexualises women and enables them to reach their full maturity. A look at the discourses surrounding the ideal wife thus permits us to identify central meanings associated with being a woman.⁵

Many other scholars have highlighted the increased post-Mao emphasis on biology in determining expected social roles and gendered behaviour. Whilst acknowledging, as Evans suggests, that this is not an entirely new phenomenon in Chinese society and culture, they generally argue that the renewed emphasis is particularly strong compared with and largely owing to the prevalence of the ‘androgy nous’ (or some might say masculine) ideals of the Cultural Revolution period.⁶

In *Personal Voices*, the classic 1980s book on Chinese women by Gail Hershatter and Emily Honig, the authors note that in contrast to the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution, girls in the 1980s were told explicitly that ‘biology is destiny’.⁷ And for females it was a restrictive destiny – it was only by overcoming their inherent biological weaknesses that they could potentially reach the level of their male counterparts.⁸ Lisa Rofel agrees that in contemporary China the rising influence of biology in understanding the constitution of masculinity and femininity “has meant that women are becoming more strongly tied to domesticity and motherhood. Women’s activities in the

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⁵ Ibid, p. 336.
home are no longer condemned as feudal social arrangements, rather they are said to be a natural expression of the female self.\textsuperscript{9}

Margaret Y. K. Woo also comments on the re-emphasis of biology in concepts of gender, but focuses on how women are defined and constructed as ‘women workers’. She summarises that “for urban women workers, China has turned to ‘protective’ legislation which focuses on the biological differences between women and men. While these laws make an effort to accommodate women’s reproductive needs in the workplace they also reveal the latest reality that ‘women’s problems’ are increasingly discussed as a matter of biology, and less as social problems.”\textsuperscript{10} Woo attributes this to a combination of Confucian tradition and ever-changing state priorities and goals.\textsuperscript{11}

Much has been written about the Chinese family, from just about every disciplinary perspective.\textsuperscript{12} One popular approach has been to focus on the centrality of the family unit to society and politics. Literature on ‘family externality’, or those who are outside the family unit, addresses one or both of two major aspects – the effects of these ‘outsiders’ on state and society, and the effects of being ‘outsiders’ on the social and gender identity of the individuals and groups themselves. Studies generally conclude that people who live without a family are odd and unbalanced at best, and threatening to social and political order at worst. This area of research provides some basic understandings and avenues for follow-up on the matter of the significance of an individual’s marital status.

\textsuperscript{9} Rofel, ‘Liberation Nostalgia and a Yearning for Modernity.’
\textsuperscript{10} Woo, ‘Chinese Women Workers: The Delicate Balance between Protection and Equality’, p. 279.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
While Matthew H. Sommer and David Ownby have written on the perceived dangers for society of men who are outside the family, and the questions this positionality has raised in reference to masculine identity, possibly a more frequently discussed link between one’s position vis-à-vis the family and one’s (perceived consequent) gender identity is that between womanhood or femininity and wifehood and motherhood. Susan Mann illustrates that such a link is one with deep historical roots, already well-evident in the Qing dynasty practices surrounding marriage. Central to Mann’s work on ‘grooming a daughter for marriage’ during the mid Qing is the idea that woman and wife were synonymous, such that to speak of an ideal woman was to speak of an ideal wife. Mann speaks of a trend during this time, not unlike the trend in Victorian England, of an increasing gendered separation of public and private domains. Women were expressly responsible for the harmonious management of families, and respectable women were expected to remain firmly grounded within them. Women outside the family but who had the dangerous capacity to have close contact with the inner quarters were described as ‘the six hags’. These included female physicians, religious adepts, go-betweens, peddlers, and nuns. This is an interesting categorisation, which may potentially be useful in looking at the new manifestations of purported single womanhood – women with PhDs and professional, high-income women. Are they the new incarnations of these ‘hags’, defined as such primarily on the basis of their relationship to marriage and families?


Gail Hershatter has written on the position of prostitution as a social and developmental metaphor in the early twentieth century. Hershatter argues that the women working as prostitutes at that time became for many a sign of social trouble and urban disorder.\textsuperscript{15} She writes that “the Nationalist regime and its twentieth century municipal governments sought to enlarge their domain of regulation to include the family, echoing both their Confucian antecedents and the modernising regimes of Europe. In their view, encoded in regulations on trafficking and prostitution, women in families were indicative of a well-ordered society.”\textsuperscript{16} Women outside families, conversely, were not.

The twin ideas of gender norms firmly grounded in biology and the socio-political significance of being viewed as outside the family unit are central in explaining the content of current discourses about high-status women and their perceived unmarriageability. As this dissertation demonstrates, the strong, outward-facing male juxtaposed against the soft, inward-facing female is an image challenged by the success of high-status women in very public realms, and this challenge appears to have given rise to a degree of anxiety about the effect of this challenge on society more broadly.

\textit{Sex, love, and relationships}

Research and writing on sex, love and relationships in China has been steadily growing over recent decades, particularly since the 1980s. Although commentators unanimously concur that attitudes and practices of romance, marriage, and sex have changed in China in recent decades, debate often


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.}
arises over the extent. In particular, there are claims and counterclaims on whether or nor urban China is currently undergoing a 'sexual revolution'.

In their 1988 book on Chinese women in the 1980s, Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter observe that the early post-Mao years witnessed a number of changes in attitudes about and practices of sex, romance, and marriage. They note an explosion in discussion of courtship practices, changing marital criteria, growing numbers of single people, an increased acceptance of premarital sex, and a rise in cohabitation among other things, although all the while with the more traditional notions of being a good wife, mother and daughter weighing in the background for women.17

In an article published in the Journal of Comparative Family Studies in 1994, Vern L. Bullough and Fang Fu Ruan assert that a revolution in sexual attitudes is quietly taking place “beneath the veneer of Chinese society …similar to that which took place in the West a few decades earlier.”18 One of the biggest components of this involves changing attitudes towards premarital sex. They refer to a 1989/90 survey of 23,000 Chinese in 15 provinces, out of which 86% said they approved of premarital sex.19 Bullough and Ruan also report the comments of Liu Dalin, head of the Shanghai Sexual Sociology Research Centre, who “estimated that 30% of China’s youth [no age range given] actually engaged in premarital sex at the time of the survey and felt more would have done so if effective contraceptives had been more widely available.”20

Harriet Evans paints a nuanced picture of developments in public approaches to romance and sex in reform-era China in her 1997 book, discussed above.

17 Honig and Hershatter, Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s, pp. 81-2, 107, 114-5, 173.
20 Ibid.
She compares the visual images of the 1980s media, which show a “sexual permissiveness unrestrained by the realities of social pressure” with the still conservative anti-premarital sex bias evident in accompanying texts.21 Evans observes that since that time, given the increasing shortage of women and the general nature of the patriarchal society, women’s bodies have again become commodities. This focus on the sexualised (especially female) body has become a preoccupation in reformist representations of premarital love, and a discursive site at which the state may intervene in the matter of young people’s sexual conduct, without the public presence it had in the past.22 Thus, within the apparent openness is the continued presence of the state. A statistic which could be seen as evidence of the success of the government in keeping moral/social stability-threatening behaviour in check was reported in a 1990 survey of women’s status, conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and published in Amnesty International’s 1995 Country Report. According to this survey “nearly 70 per cent of all respondents agreed with the statement that ‘a woman’s virginity is more important than her life’.” 23

The French philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault is commonly invoked when discussing discourses about sex and sexuality. Foucault traces the development of the Western concept of sexuality, showing that sexuality is not a fixed thing but a historically contingent social construction. He argues that sexuality has been employed in different ways at different times, as a means of distributing certain kinds of power. Foucault believes that the dominant ‘repressive thesis’, which states that ever since the Victorian era discussion of sexuality has been repressed and silenced, is completely incorrect. Rather, there has been a proliferation of discourses on sexuality. Foucault sees this

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22 Ibid, pp. 86-98.
23 Quoted in Ibid, p. 108. Throughout my fieldwork and media analysis I have observed and participated in heated discussions concerning this very question. There appears to be a large percentage of people who very much agree with this statement.
proliferation as a method of social control, enacted through such practices as the confession, which establishes ideas of deep self-scrutiny and revelation, and through the medicalisation of sexuality, which pathologises certain (typically non-reproductive) sexual behaviours and thoughts.24

Although stemming from a different cultural or ‘civilisational’ background, the work of Foucault on discourses of sexuality as tools of social control might also be applicable to the Chinese context. This idea of suspicious or ‘pathologised’ sexualities in China is one which Harriet Evans takes up. In *Women and Sexuality in China* Evans argues that prior to the Cultural Revolution the communist state was basically just worried about female virginity and adultery. Now, the scope of concern is much broader, as awareness (and occurrence) of possible ‘transgressions’ has expanded. With reference to the 1990s, Evans states that “the identification of pre-marital sexuality, homosexuality, promiscuity, celibacy and spinstership as ‘abnormal’ and ‘improper’ behaviours is located within official attempts to impose order at a time of social chaos.”25 Evans elaborates that, as argued by Foucault, “attention to sexual practices and identities that disturb the boundaries of socially acceptable sexuality is a powerful mode of reinforcing the principles of dominant discourses.”26

While many scholars continue to conduct research that is primarily image and literature based, from about the mid 1990s onwards there has been a shift towards a more broad-based ethnographic approach to sexuality. Kathleen Erwin, in her 1998 PhD dissertation on women’s sexual practices in 1990s Shanghai, suggests that one may not simply say there is a ‘sexual revolution’ sweeping urban China. She invokes Foucault to state that greater sexual knowledge and changing sexual mores do not necessarily mean greater

26 Ibid, p. 189.
freedom. At the heart of sexual attitudes and practices in Shanghai, says Erwin, is the influence of the competing state aims of ‘stability’ (wending) and ‘openness’ (kaifang). This has meant that women have actively reinterpreted traditional ideas such as ‘virtuous wife, good mother’ (xianqi liangmu) such that they are able to achieve goals of material success and mobility whilst still paying necessary heed to state and social pressures which require women to be located within families as a foundation of social stability.

William Jankowiak argues, in a number of books and articles based on ethnographic research, that educated urban Chinese are revising their ideas on sex and pleasure (especially female pleasure). However, he stops short of describing such revisions as a revolution. In his examination of seventy families in Huhhot in Inner Mongolia, Jankowiak observed that the issue of experimentation in his sample is consistent with non-Chinese surveys which link increased education with increased sexual experimentation. In other works he argues for a greater understanding of the near universality of the concept of romantic love. In *Intimacies: Love and Sex across Cultures*, Jankowiak alongside Thomas Paladino states that romantic love, comfort love, and sexual desire are present in all cultures, including urban China, but the need to establish and re-establish working (generally hierarchical) relationships between all three has had complex but illuminating consequences in many societies.

28 Ibid.
Yan Yunxiang’s *Private Life under Socialism* is an ethnography of family life in rural China from 1949 to 1999. In it Yan moves away from the typical ‘corporate’ model of Chinese families to an approach which takes greater account of the needs, desires, attitudes and behaviour of individual family members. He observes several trends such as “the privatization of the family, the increasing importance of intimacy and emotionality in family life, the rise of individuality, and the growing crisis of civility”. While these trends are observed in the context of village life, Yan’s observations are important for my study, as he notes that this change from the family as a social institution to the family as a private haven for individuals has been occurring throughout China since the 1980s, and that a methodological ramification of this is that one of the most telling ways to study modern families is to look at the lived experiences of its individuals rather than seeking to just study families as wholes. This is an approach taken in this study.

James Farrer has delved into the issues of youth, sex, and contemporary market-driven culture, and like Kathleen Erwin before him he focuses on what is commonly understood to be China’s most ‘cosmopolitan’ city, Shanghai. In his 2002 book *Opening Up*, Farrer explores the sex and dating habits of 18- to 35-year-olds in the city between 1980 and 2000. He applies a model of dramatists (actors) involved in grammars of courtship. Interestingly, Farrer applies an Anthony Giddens-style approach, which I will discuss in greater detail later, saying that “in modern societies generally, sexual storytelling plays a key role in self-identity formation, in which selfhood can be defined as the ‘capacity to keep a narrative going.’”

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34 Ibid, p. 31.
Farrer found that there was a “dual discourse of material and romantic motives” when talking about sex and relationships in the new market society. This is particularly evident in his discussion about the debate over the importance of gangqing (feelings) versus tiaojian (conditions). Farrer also deals directly with the issue of hypergamy, which, as will become clear, is significant in understanding both the rhetoric and reality of my interviewees’ lives. Farrer explains the strongly-held desire of Chinese women to ‘marry up’ as being in part related to the nature of the market economy. As he puts it, “women generally look for husbands who will provide the best economic conditions for them and their children. At the same time, women must rely upon husbands as their own emotional refuge from the struggles of the market economy.”

Farrer also discusses the rhetoric around womanhood in Shanghai. Farrer refers to the ‘Shanghai girl’ of pre-1949, variously depicted as a Jazz Age prostitute, dance hall girl, and film star, and states that this icon has now melded into the ‘white-collar miss’ or ‘fashionable girl’ of the 1990s, a figure that apparently arouses strong public interest in the city. In the public imagination, she “works in the Shanghai branch office of a foreign firm, earns a high salary, speaks English, enjoys the nightlife, marries late, is sexually active, and even dates foreigners and married men while engaging in a difficult search for a husband with even higher status and earnings than herself.” Reflecting on the significance of such a model of womanhood, particularly in terms of consumerism and the social and moral order, Farrer observes that,

…the ‘fashionable girl’ engages in a ‘completely new type’ of autonomous lifestyle based on her new power as a consumer, and now also as a salary earner. Typically a clerical or service worker, she sells her youth and talents,

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36 Ibid, p. 15.
37 Ibid, p. 100.
buys her own entertainment, pays for her own living space, and fears
commitment, love, and marriage. The new fashionable Shanghai girl subsumes
a number of more specific characters (from the ‘white-collar girl’ to the ‘model’
and ‘hostess’) who embody the contradictions of her autonomous (but
commodified) sexually and financially independent (but mercenary) lifestyle.
She is usually young, unmarried, and sexually active. Such characters provide
a continuity to the episodic public conversations and moral panics about the
pleasures and dangers of the market economy and the moral boundaries
defined around young women’s sexual choices.³⁸

The explorations by Farrer, Jankowiak and Erwin among others provide a good
basis from which to launch a study into the personal lives of high-status women
in contemporary Beijing. While these researchers have not written about
sexuality in Beijing, and while, other than perhaps Erwin’s, their studies have
not been framed with exclusive reference to a particular socio-economic sub-
stratum of society, their analyses of the interrelationships between the
cosmopolitanism and relative wealth of cities and the personal lives lived by
their citizens nonetheless ring true in my findings. In addition, we share
methodological similarities, making use of significant in-field research, including
interviews and personal observations.

Most of the above research has been produced by researchers based outside
China. Within mainland China, the number of sociological studies of sex has
grown in recent years. Two of the foremost scholars in this field are Li Yinhe
and Pan Suiming. Li Yinhe, whom some claim is “China’s first female
sociologist of sex”³⁹, has produced dozens of texts relating to the sexual
attitudes and practices of contemporary Chinese, including Sexuality and

³⁸ Ibid, p. 43.
The Subculture of Homosexuality (1998), and Sexuality and Love of Chinese Women (2002).\textsuperscript{40} Li Yinhe’s writings suggest that there is indeed a sexual revolution occurring in China, and that this has been the case for well over a decade. She supports this with observations of increased pre-marital sex, increased homosexual sex, and increased sex outside of marriage.\textsuperscript{41}

Pan Suiming is a renowned scholar in this field, having conducted research into sexuality in China for over twenty years. In Sexuality in China, Pan traces out the history of sex in China, paying particular attention to those aspects of that history that were distinctly Chinese, such as the concept of yin and yang as applied to sexual acts. Pan also highlights the longstanding involvement of the Chinese state in defining and policing sexuality. He discusses how the state’s most recent major intervention in the personal lives of citizens, the introduction of the one-child policy, has had huge unintended consequences for sexual attitudes and behaviour across the country. By separating sex from reproduction, the state \textit{de facto} announced that sex was something that could be done purely for pleasure, which in reality indirectly meant that it did not even have to be connected to love or marriage.\textsuperscript{42} A shift such as this has the capacity to affect the balance between the ever-present forces of sexual desire, passionate love, and attachment love that Jankowiak observes.\textsuperscript{43} Pan notes that these changes in understandings have in fact had the effect of raising the expectations of women in terms of their own sexual fulfilment. Given that this has occurred in parallel with the rising economic independence of women and

\textsuperscript{40} 李, 银河 [Li Yinhe], 中国人的性爱与婚姻 [Sexuality and Marriage in China] (Zhengzhou: Henan People’s Press, 1991); 李, 银河 [Li Yinhe], 中国婚姻家庭及其变迁 [Changing Chinese Marriage and the Family] (哈尔滨人民出版社, 1995); 李, 银河 [Li Yinhe], 同性恋亚文化 [Subculture of Homosexuality] (北京: 今日出版社, 1998); 李, 银河 [Li Yinhe], 中国女性的感伤与性 [The Sexuality and Feelings of Chinese Women] (北京: 中国友谊出版公司, 2002);

\textsuperscript{41} See http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2005-06/03/content_3041598.htm. Accessed 23 May 2009. This interview suggests that Li believes Chinese people’s sexual attitudes are changing rapidly, and makes reference to her findings that the percentage of people having premarital sex was 15.5% in 1989, and this increased to 60-70% in 2004.


\textsuperscript{43} Jankowiak (ed.), Intimacies: Love and Sex across Cultures.
a relaxing of rules regarding divorce, the sexual dissatisfaction of women is noted to have led not only to a lot of unhappy women, but also to increases in female-initiated divorces.  

Pan Suiming’s analyses of the consequences of the separation of sex from reproduction sit well alongside ideas put forward Anthony Giddens. In *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Giddens contends that changes in family forms, in particular the limiting of numbers of children, has led to sex being freed from the confines of reproduction. This “plastic sexuality” as he calls it has in turn had huge ramifications for the nature of intimate relationships in modern societies. Giddens describes personal relationships in high modernity as having moved to a new stage, where what is sought is neither simply passionate romantic love nor economic exchange and gender-based functional complementarity but rather “confluent love”. Confluent love is the equivalent of democracy at the intimate, interpersonal level. Giddens believes that people now seek relationships based on equality. Relationships are no longer conceived as necessarily ‘forever’ but rather ‘while it suits us both’. This is part of a model of a so-called “pure relationship”.

Giddens argues that this move towards the democratisation of intimate relationships is leading to a diversity of lifestyles. The normative hold of heterosexual marriage is waning, and many activities that were previously considered ‘perversions’ are now being accepted as legitimate ways to define one’s sexuality and express one’s identity. While Giddens’ example is often homosexuality, this dissertation shows that concept has some validity in understanding non-normative intimate life choices made and lived by the women of my study.

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46 Ibid.
Giddens views women as the leaders of a ‘revolution’ in intimate lives. Women were excluded from full participation in the changes of the last few centuries that have transformed public life, and in this position of exclusion found themselves leading changes at a different level. Giddens believes the changes wrought by women in this space have the capacity to further transform society. The shift in the balance of power at the domestic level, he suggests, is bound to have ramifications for social institutions more broadly. This is an interesting perspective to bring to a study of the personal lives of high-status women in Beijing.

Another idea discussed in The Transformation of Intimacy, and which was explored in greater detail in Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age, is that of life as being a reflexively understood and constituted ‘project’.47 The idea of “the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives” 48 as being essential to developing and maintaining a sense of self and a personal and social identity is a lens through which to understand the stories told to me by high-status women. As this dissertation shows, the ‘life as a project’ approach is of most relevance to those women who are in the best economic positions and who therefore have a stronger sense of control over their own lives.

Moral panics

In relation to the question of why negative portrayals of certain groups appear in the media, Stanley Cohen’s concept of ‘moral panic’ provides an interesting starting point. For Cohen, a moral panic is when a "condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests."\(^49\) As Kevin Hetherington elaborates, “Cohen’s argument is that the media turn particular groups, whose activities they see as delinquent or deviant, into folk devils or scapegoats in order to highlight and amplify anxieties about deviant behaviour in a society as a whole. This leads to the creation of what he calls a moral panic.”\(^50\) Taken to their full extension, the moral panics described by Cohen have a legislative outcome, in that the media’s highlighting and exaggeration of the threat of this group means it is easier for the government of the day to enact legislation that seeks to control or limit the problem group. While this has not occurred and is not expected to occur in the case of highly educated and high-income women, the concept of the media playing on concerns about groups whose behaviour appears to threaten some fundamental aspect of the social order is a useful one to employ in this study.

Cohen’s concept of moral panics has been applied in a contemporary Chinese context. Borge Bakken is one author who has done so. Bakken has examined the Chinese reaction against juvenile crime and juvenile transgression, including sexual transgression, and states that it fits well with the picture painted in Cohen’s classic description of a moral panic. He believes that it is no coincidence that campaigns against so-called ‘rising crime’ came not at a time when crime rates were on the rise but rather at a time when society was going


through the difficult and destabilising process of market reforms. Others whose work has combined concepts of moral panics with contemporary Chinese issues are Sun Wanning in her works on maids, and James Farrer in relation to sexuality in Shanghai, as was noted in his analyses of the Shanghai girl discussed above. In this dissertation I apply the logic behind the concept of the moral panic to discourses about high-status women and marriage, finding that this logic in part explains the rise and perpetuation of these discourses in the popular media.

The middle class in China

My dissertation research focuses on a sub-set of the Chinese middle class – highly educated women and financially successful women – who are studied as an entry point into middle-class Chinese mores. At the heart of the recent literature on the Chinese middle class is often the question of a definition. There is widespread disagreement as to what might constitute the entry thresholds into such a class in China. As a result the numbers projected to be in this group vary widely. Some scholars even argue that there is no such thing as a ‘middle class’ in China.

David Goodman, one of the most prolific writers on the topic, often uses the phrase ‘new rich’ to describe those persons commonly understood to constitute the present-day Chinese middle class: that is, the well-off social group that has emerged as a result of major changes to the economy and society from the

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1980s.\textsuperscript{53} This is not necessarily a cohesive, unified group, but encompasses such persons as managers of the state and collective sector enterprises, owner-operators, professionals and trend-setters.

While there is disagreement in terms of what income indicates that one is part of the middle class, the National Bureau of Statistics declared in 2005 that an annual individual income between 60,000 and 500,000 RMB provided the salary parameters of the middle class. In 2007 \textit{Xinhua} stated that 6.15\% of the population have an annual income of that range.\textsuperscript{54} For those who live in metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai where the cost of living is higher than national averages, an income beyond this may be required in order to live a middle-class lifestyle. In addition to income requirements, some tertiary education is also presumed for those within this class.\textsuperscript{55}

The exact definition of China’s middle class, and the appropriateness of the term, are not issues that need to be resolved here. What is relevant is that this group has developed in China and that studies of this group and its members have largely focused on two themes: their power as consumers, and their role in furthering democracy.

It is not surprising that the role of these middle class or ‘new rich’ Chinese as consumers is often discussed by both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars.\textsuperscript{56}

Increasing incomes and leisure time conveniently couple with high levels of


consumption, and this is considered to be a defining feature of the class.\textsuperscript{57} To this effect, a survey of the Chinese middle class conducted in 2005 finds that the middle class spend a larger proportion of their income than average on housing, entertainment, and advanced consumption.\textsuperscript{58} Through such behaviour, these people are considered to be meeting economic reform objectives of the Chinese government and giving voice to the new national ideology – consumerism.\textsuperscript{59}

The potential for the middle class to be a force for democratic change in China, the other frequently researched issue, is premised on the assumption that increased levels of education, income, and international exposure will drive a greater civic consciousness, which will flow into increasing democratisation.\textsuperscript{60} This is what is understood to have occurred in many Western nations.\textsuperscript{61} As David Martin Jones puts it in his discussion of democratisation and civil society in Pacific Asia,

A prevailing understanding in the study of political and economic development holds that economic modernization creates an irresistible pressure for liberal democratic political change. Authoritarian rule may offer the initial stability necessary for economic growth, but, as fully developed modernity approaches, it becomes increasingly redundant and reluctantly withers away. Depending on one's theoretical preference, the overt or covert hand promoting this change is an articulate, urban, and self-confident middle class.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{57} Robison and Goodman, (eds.), \textit{The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, MacDonalds and Middle-Class Revolution.} 
\textsuperscript{58} 周晓虹, 中国中产阶层调查. 
\textsuperscript{61} This argument was perhaps most famously put forward by Seymour Martin Lipset. See Seymour Martin Lipset, \textit{Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics} (New York: Doubleday, 1960). 
\textsuperscript{62} Jones, 'Democratization, Civil Society, and Illiberal Middle Class Culture in Pacific Asia'.

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The potential role of the Chinese middle class as agents for change in the realm of intimate or personal lives has largely been ignored. This dissertation takes steps to redress this lacuna by examining the personal life courses of women that could be seen to belong to this social stratum and documenting the ways in which they are active in constructing and putting into effect changing ideas about intimate relationships.

*International studies of marriage patterns*

Researchers working in population studies, demography, and family studies have explored variables affecting marital practices in a number of countries. Seminal work on the effect of education on entry into marriage has been conducted by Hans-Peter Blossfeld, in collaboration with a number of other scholars. In a 1992 article on this issue in West Germany, Blossfeld and Ursula Jaenichen find that educational enrolment had a negative effect on the rate of entry into marriage, but that the level of education in which one was enrolled was not significant. They conclude that highly educated women postpone marriage not because they have accumulated a greater stock of human capital and therefore see less to be gained from marriage, but because in remaining enrolled in school they are postponing their entry into adulthood. The effect of the increasing educational attainment of women is "confined to the period of transition from youth to adulthood and does not seem to continue through much of [their] adult life." Blossfeld also edited a 1995 volume surveying entry into marriage in nine countries: Sweden, West Germany, France, the Netherlands, Great Britain, the United States, Italy, Spain, and Hungary. Giving greater

64 Ibid.
credence to the above argument, this volume shows that in most countries higher educational attainment is associated with later marriage among women primarily because longer school enrolment results in delayed exposure to opportunities for marriage.65

In the East Asian context, studies of Japanese marriage entry patterns are particularly prominent. Such studies generally note that Japan now has one of the latest average ages at first marriage in the world. In 2001 Retherford et. al. stated that age at first marriage in Japan had risen dramatically since 1975. In addition, there have been significant and steady increases in the proportions of both men and women who never marry at all.66 Their paper concludes that:

The trend toward late marriage and less marriage has come about because of a confluence of interrelated economic, social and cultural changes, including remarkable educational gains by women, massive increases in the proportion of women who work for pay outside the home, major changes in the structure and functioning of the marriage market, extraordinary increases in the prevalence of premarital sex, and far-reaching changes in values relating to marriage and family life.67

Interestingly for my purposes, in light of the contents of the ‘Third Sex’ discourse, Retherford et. al. make the case that for men, education has the opposite effect as it does for women on the “lifetime celibacy rate” (i.e., rate of never marrying). University-educated women have a relatively high rate of never marrying, whereas university-educated men have a relatively low rate of never marrying.68 They conclude that this is likely due to men preferring women

68 Ibid, p. 72.
who are less educated than they are, women preferring men who are more educated than they are, or both, “making it relatively difficult for poorly educated men and highly educated women to find spouses.”\textsuperscript{69} The net effect of university education (relative to junior high school education) is to raise the average age at first marriage by approximately two years and to increase the proportion of women who are still single at 40 years of age from 3\% to 20\%.\textsuperscript{70} Further, and again related to the women of my study, Retherford et. al. observe that urban childhood residence has the effect of raising the proportion of people still single at age 40 from 5 to 11\%.\textsuperscript{71}

Retherford et. al. also posit that the shift from arranged to love marriages in Japan in recent decades in part accounts for the demise of universal marriage.\textsuperscript{72} They go on to say that the decline in arranged marriage has had large effects on both age at marriage and chances of never marrying because a fully-functioning marriage market has not formed to fill the vacuum. Social institutions and practices which allow friendships between Japanese men and women with similar interests have apparently developed slowly and are still limited.\textsuperscript{73} In addition, the move from arranged to love marriages reflects an increasing individualism, which Retherford et. al. suggest has an impact on marriage choices.\textsuperscript{74}

The relationship between education levels and age at marriage in Japan is discussed in more technical detail by James M. Raymo. In 2003 he concludes, based on an analysis of the Japanese government’s Tenth National Fertility Survey, that while the trend toward later and less marriage is occurring at all levels of educational attainment, university education “is increasingly

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, pp. 73-4.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, p. 86.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, p. 87.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, pp. 86-99.
associated with later and less marriage." The main reason for this association for women was the prolonged period spent undertaking study, which, due to cultural expectations around the role of wife, meant that entry into marriage was delayed. In addition, the likelihood of marriage for Japanese women in the most prestigious occupational category, ‘professional-managerial’, was significantly lower than that for other white-collar women, “perhaps reflecting the hypothesised marriage-inhibiting effect of greater economic resources.”

Subsequent analysis conducted by Raymo and Miho Iwasawa on the reasons for the decline in marriage rates among highly educated women in Japan, “one of the few societies in which the relationship between women’s educational attainment and marriage is negative,” concludes that the lack of availability of suitable partners, defined as being men “of a similar or higher status than themselves”, has a significant impact on rates of never marriage among this group. When Japan was compared with other countries in a test of the hypothesis that only in those with a high degree of gender-based role differentiation “does the inverse relationship between women’s economic standing and the chance of marriage exist”, Hiromi Ono found that higher levels of income discourage first marriage in Japan, but encourage it in the United States and Sweden, the other two nations of her study.

Almost all of the studies of the type described above conflate educational attainment with economic independence, viewing education as a global indicator of women’s earning capacity, that is, as a proxy for income. My study provides an interesting perspective as it separates these two measures. This is

76 Ibid, p. 99.
77 Ibid, p. 92.
79 Ibid, p. 806.
important because those who continue to the PhD level in China are more likely to follow an academic path than their classmates who terminated their studies at the Bachelors or Masters degree level, and, as in many cultures, academia is often less well-paying than the corporate world. The direct contrast in this dissertation of the personal life courses of high-income women with women who have very high education levels but not necessarily high incomes is instructive, helping to answer the question of what exactly it is that most contributes to late and less marriage.

Locating my study

To summarise, this dissertation explores a puzzle not unlike that explored in the studies of marriage in Japan, but from a different perspective, relying on media analysis and fieldwork rather than simply on statistical modelling and the interpretation of quantitative data. It builds on the significant ethnographic work on love, romance and marriage in urban centres done by Jankowiak, Farrer and Erwin, but in a new city and looking at members of a specific socio-economic group. It provides a contemporary perspective on the social and personal significance of being (or of being perceived to be) outside the family structure by dint of not being a married woman, showing that this is clearly not just a historical concern. My exploration of the content of the discourses that seek to claim the unmarriageability of high-status women confirms the continuing importance of gender norms based on biological roles. Finally my examination of the presence of these discourses in the media demonstrates that even seemingly innocent characters can become centres of attention when what they represent causes social anxiety.
Methodology

As noted in the opening of this chapter the group that spurred this study was women who had PhDs or were studying for them. Ordinarily, this tiny subgroup of Chinese society\(^{81}\) might not be considered especially worthwhile studying, except insofar as they may address certain issues of gender and educational access, or the development of higher education as a whole. However, the fact that they have become the subjects (or objects) of a well-known and rather negative discourse raises questions about the current gender order. The possibility that such women might be disproportionately engaged in non-normative arrangements, including sustained singledom, raises questions about what socio-economic status means when it comes to romantic lives, and whether these women are in some ways flag-bearers of larger changes in this sphere of Chinese society.

The second group comprises professional women with high incomes of over 5,000 RMB per month. Whereas women who have undertaken PhD degrees acquire high status according to the measure of education, which has particular weight in the Chinese context due to a long history of a high regard for education, these latter women have acquired high status according to a measure which has increasing weight in contemporary Chinese society: income. This provides an avenue for comparison and contrast within the context of high-status Chinese women. Searches of Chinese popular media as well as discussions with Beijing residents suggest that, like their highly educated

\(^{81}\) In the Beijing statistical yearbook 2004, the number of female PhD students was given as 10,339. According to my calculations, this is approximately 0.09% of the total population of Beijing, listed in the same sources as 11,488,000. 中华人民共和国国家统计局 (2004). 北京市统计参考资料 2004 (北京: 中国统计出版社).
sisters, the personal lives of high-income women are the subject of public discussion.

As will be outlined in further detail in Chapter 4, the majority of the women of my study are younger than 35 years of age. In relation to the highly educated cohort, this is largely an artefact of the fact that PhD programs have only become common in Chinese universities in recent decades, and opportunities to undertake such programs abroad were also extremely limited until the period of reform and opening up. In relation to the high-income cohort, opportunities for women to earn high salaries in commercial and professional spheres have only recently begun to blossom in Beijing.

In order to undertake comparison and contrast between the two groups it is important that both are constituted of women of a similar age spread. In addition, studying women of this age group is most appropriate when looking at marriage choices. With the Chinese government officially considering 23 years of age as “late marriage”, and 30 years of age being considered well and truly “over the hill” for a single woman, a woman must form and put into practice her views on marriage well before her 35th birthday. And as this study seeks to contribute to an understanding of contemporary urban Chinese sexual, gender, and familial norms and to broaden our understanding of the role of the educated middle class at the forefront of changes in intimate relationships, it is fitting that I am exploring the lives of a new generation of elite women.

This study employs primarily qualitative research approaches, combining media analysis with interviews with high-status women in Beijing. While to some extent media analysis was possible from my desk in Canberra, in order to gain access to additional print media and to get to know the women of my group, I made three trips to Beijing to undertake fieldwork. My first period of fieldwork
ran for just under six months, from February to July 2005. This included twelve weeks located at and attached to Beijing University as part of a university exchange scheme. Following these twelve weeks, I rented an apartment in a middle-class district of Beijing to continue my research. A second fieldwork period ran from mid November 2005 until mid February 2006, during which time I again lived in a middle-class apartment complex. I returned to China for a final month of field research in October 2006.

Media analysis

Through the exploration of relevant documentary material I sought to uncover the existence of any discourses or narratives surrounding these two sets of women, to examine the content of these discourses, to grasp the breadth of coverage in the press, and to understand the origins and intent of the discourses.

In urban China, particularly in major metropolises like Beijing, the range of available media sources is vast. Corner newsstands are stocked with a wide range of local and national newspapers, including some international papers and dozens upon dozens of (largely domestic) magazines covering everything from fashion to golf to international affairs. China is also leading the world in new internet subscribers, and urban areas are dotted with internet cafes for those who are not able to go online at home or work.\(^{82}\) In 2004 China had more than 90 million internet users, and the number was rising exponentially.\(^{83}\)

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\(^{82}\) Jianxiong Zhou, ‘A Robust, Healthy Internet’, *Beijing Review*, 49/52 (28 December 2006), p.3. In this article Zhou refers to a report compiled by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CINIC), which indicated that there were 123 million internet users in Beijing as of June 2006, which represented a 19.4% increase from the previous year. In addition, the report found that internet users were online for 16.5 hours per week, up 17.9% on the previous year and representing one full waking day per week spent on the internet.

the end of 2008, according to an annual statistical compendium released in January 2009 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, there were over 300 million internet users across the country. 206 million Chinese, or 68.6% of the total internet users in China, reportedly use the internet as a news source. According to the researchers from the public sentiment monitoring division of the People's Daily Online, these numbers increased significantly in 2008.\(^{84}\)

As well as using the internet as a source of formal news content, internet users are increasingly becoming engaged with the phenomenon of bulletin board systems (known widely in China as BBSs) or message boards. BBSs have become a major feature of literate modern China, and often act as virtual communities. Some of the most popular BBSs have more than 300,000 registered users.\(^{85}\) Many have tens of thousands of users accessing the site at any one time – I personally have seen almost 20,000 people actively logged on to the Beijing University BBS at one time.\(^{86}\) A campaign waged in late 2004 and 2005 saw the closure of many of the most popular BBSs, including those of Beijing and Qinghua universities. Western media reported that,

In a surprisingly broad and deep targeting of thought and expression here, authorities across China have shut or drastically curtailed college Internet message boards — a powerful vehicle for free exchange, and one used far more by non-students than students...


\(^{86}\) When I first began monitoring the Beijing University BBS in 2004, the web address was http://bbs.pku.edu.cn. An alternative and extremely popular site was yht.net. Both sites were shut down at the end of 2004. Details of the shutdown in late 2004 and 2005 are at http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-04-05-beijing-sites_x.htm and http://sdming.gjiblog.com/archives/298562/. At the time of writing, the current official web address for the Beijing University BBS is https://bdwm.net/.
University message boards in China have become a greatly loved lifestyle for many. The entire university is connected. Students wake up and log on; they come back from class and log on. Some stay on all day. It is said at Tsinghua [Qinghua] that "if you are not on the BBS, you are on your way to the BBS."87

I have used all of the above – traditional print media, official online content, and informal online content – as sources for media analysis. Content was collected from late 2003 to mid 2009, and I have also included material from before this period. I chose newspapers, magazines, websites and other media interfaces that had high circulations or hit rates, and which were available nationally and with ease. I also ensured I looked at those websites and print media that the women whom I interviewed told me they themselves frequently accessed. In addition, I ran periodic searches through search engines such as Baidu, which is China’s most popular search engine, and Google.

Publications accessed in hard copy and online included Zhongguo Qingnian Bao (China Youth Daily), Beijing Ribao (Beijing Daily), Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily), Zhongguo Funu; People’s Daily; Xinwen Zhoukan (China News Week) and Nanfang Zhoumo (Southern Weekend). Online news sites accessed included Sina news, Sohu news, Xinhua news, China View, and China News. I also accessed internet dating sites (e.g. 51road) and BBSs (for example those hosted by sohu.com and sina.com). Within these I examined discussions, comments and letters on marriage, dating, and single men and women’s lives. I also took note of personal advertisements and advertisements for singles’ social events and marriage agencies.

87 Marquand, 'Beijing Enforces the Party Line'.
Interviews

Stories such as those told during interviews are an important source of knowledge, providing insight into processes of ascribing meaning and context to past thoughts, actions, and encounters. The stories of women can illuminate several focal aspects of gender relations, including “the construction of a gendered self-identity, the relationship between the individual and society in the creation and perpetuation of gender norms, and the dynamics of power relations between men and women”. This is a central reason why interviews were a key method I employed.

My core interviews were with a sample of 70 high-status women: 35 who had or were currently studying for PhD degrees, and 35 who earned over 5,000 RMB per month. Interviews took place at a variety of times and places, according to the preferences of the interviewees. Many were held outside in a park, in university offices, at workplaces, at restaurants over lunch or dinner, and at cafes. Interviews were generally of one to two hours in length. I met almost all of the members of my sample more than once, some of them half a dozen times or more. Interviews were informal and often more closely resembled simply “hanging out”. I allowed the interviewee to select the language of communication, and as a result around 40% of the interviews were conducted predominantly in English and 60% were conducted predominantly in Chinese. Both I and the interviewees at times dipped into our native languages to describe more complex concepts.

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Interviews were open-ended and semi-structured. We discussed their marital or
dating status and experiences; their work and study experiences; their
motivations and hesitations in choosing their work/study path; their views on
what defines a woman and a man; their views on the ideal husband and ideal
wife; whether or not they have encountered or been affected by the discourses
surrounding them; what they think other people think of them and why; and
their views on single versus married life.

Interviewees were sought through prior Beijing contacts, through contacts
made during my three month residency at Beijing University at the
commencement of my fieldwork, through the establishment of new friends and
acquaintances, and through the snow-ball method generally. I also posted
notices on various websites indicating an interest in talking to the two types of
high-status women for research purposes, and secured a few interviewees
through this method. In addition to the women in my sample, I spoke to
members of their family; their friends and colleagues; managers and staff at
marriage agencies; editors of women’s magazines; and other married and
unmarried men and women who make up the general public.

Particularly given the way in which I was drawn to this topic, it would be remiss
of me not to make some mention of the other key participant in this study: me.
As a female PhD student studying a group of women who are also PhD
students and graduates, and as a foreign woman interacting with high-income
women who often worked alongside other expatriates, I recognise that in the
stories of these women my voice is present as well as theirs. The similarities
between myself and my interview subjects provided me with a wonderful
opportunity to connect with these women. Rarely was there an issue that
appeared to be off-limits. In conducting my research, however, it has been
important that I acknowledge that these same similarities can be a drawback if
one allows unspoken assumptions to drive and colour one’s research. To counter this, I have throughout the research and writing processes attempted to interrogate my own assumptions and positions in relation to the content of this thesis. I have also taken care to maximise opportunities to “let these women speak for themselves”, noting that, even in this case, who they are speaking to remains relevant.

Surveys

To further round out my research, I also conducted two surveys. The first was a survey of mate preference of clients of marriage agencies as identified by those who worked in those agencies. These one-page paper surveys were completed by staff at 17 marriage agencies in four districts of Beijing city in the first half of 2005.

The second was a survey of the general public regarding their views on the marriageability of highly educated and high-income women. A handful of university students and I went to four districts of Beijing – Chaoyang, Haidian, Dongcheng, and Xicheng – where we stood in public places recruiting volunteers to complete the survey and asked around at local shops, businesses and so on. We collected 172 completed surveys, with respondents ranging from 18 to their 70s. The number of male and female respondents was approximately equal.
Outline of chapters

In order to provide context to understanding both the views of high-status women in urban China today as well as the nature of the personal lives they lead, Chapter 2 of this dissertation traces developments in two central areas across China’s modern history. An exploration, albeit superficial, of the position and images of urban women and the institution of marriage in urban areas allows the reader to note both continuities and changes between contemporary norms and behaviours and those of the Chinese past as they continue on with the dissertation.

Chapter 3 examines the mate preference ideals of men and women in contemporary urban China, and delves into how highly educated and high-income women are viewed against these ideals. Data and images from Chinese academic studies, the popular press, and marriage agencies show that women of high status are generally portrayed negatively in discussions of what constitutes an ideal marriage partner. The discourses that have been the catalyst for my study are analysed, in terms of both their content and the reasons why they have appeared and been perpetuated. In response to the discourses discussed in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 provides quantitative clues as to the romantic situations that these high-status women are in. I analyse official statistical information to elucidate current marital norms, and on this basis highlight the extent to which highly educated and high-income women do not conform to these.

In Chapter 5 I shift my focus more firmly towards the 35 highly educated women whom I interviewed. I begin by presenting four case studies, which illustrate some important themes with respect to the romantic situations highly
educated women are in and the reasons why their personal life courses have unfolded as they have. In subsequent sections, I tease out features of the stories of these four women, and relate them to the stories of other women in my sample, examining the interpretative repertoires these women apply in narrating their personal life stories. I pay particular attention to the questions of desire and self-identity. In Chapter 6, I repeat this process in relation to the 35 high-income women, and conclude with a comparison of women in the two high-status groups.

Following on from the discussion of the romantic desires and personal life decision-making addressed in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, Chapter 7 explains how high-status women in contemporary Beijing go about finding a person or situation consistent with their desires. It addresses how these women go about finding themselves their ideal mate, and what other options are available if they choose not to undertake this search. Finally, Chapter 8 draws together the major findings of this dissertation and identifies some of the intriguing questions that remain.
Chapter 2: Women and Marriage in Urban China

Changes and continuities in the position and images of women and the institution of marriage bear upon both the representations of high-status urban Chinese women today and the romantic paths they travel. An understanding of the developments in these realms across China’s modern history also conveys the size and scope of the changes taking place in these areas as well as plays an important role in highlighting the socio-political potential of these changes. This chapter briefly outlines some of the features of these areas across China’s modern history, starting with the situation in the late imperial period and bringing us up to the beginning of the twenty-first century. The focus is on circumstances in urban areas.

There are two issues that I wish to address before moving on to a discussion of these important fields of enquiry. Firstly, I acknowledge that it would be impossible for me to provide a complete history of these issues within a single chapter, and base it entirely on archival research. Such an exercise would, in any case, not be useful for this dissertation. This chapter is in a sense a 'history of the present' – a tracing of the historical development of issues that are of most relevance to the present that I wish to interrogate in the remainder of this dissertation. I appreciate that some historiographers may object to this approach on the grounds that it could lend itself towards providing a misleading view of history, simplifying the relationship between cause and effect and
perhaps inappropriately attributing contemporary meanings to past events. I note these risks and heed these warnings, but still believe that it is essential to include some historical context for the important purpose of avoiding an approach to a study of the present that speaks of the present as if it is ahistorical.

Secondly, in terms of the structure of this chapter, I have broken material into historical periods, aligned with well-known political turning points in Chinese history. In doing so, I recognise that there is not a steady march through history from the ‘past’ and ‘tradition’ to the ‘present’ and ‘modernity’, that history is complex and multidirectional. Nonetheless, given the close relationship between gender and marriage norms, a linear approach is useful as it reduces the amount of repetition that would be created by tracing out developments in these areas separately in a more thematic-based approach. In addition, a more chronological structure allows the reader to get a sense of the situation at given points in history. This said, in reading that which follows I encourage the reader to recognise that there is as much continuity as change, as much circularity as ‘linear’ progression, and considerably more complexity than certainty on a range of the issues addressed

Late imperial period

During the late imperial period Chinese law did not consider women to be full, independent persons with the free will and free choice attributed to men.¹ Women’s legal existence and rights were derived from relationships to others: the extended family unit and more particularly the men within that unit. In many

¹ Philip C. Huang, 'Women’s Choices under the Law: Marriage, Divorce and Illicit Sex in the Qing and the Republic', Modern China, 27/1 (2001), pp. 3-58.
senses women were considered as akin to chattel, owned by fathers when single and husbands when married. Women did not have property rights, other than their dowry, and were not inheritors to deceased estates. The position of women within legal codes in the late imperial period both reflected and defined their social position at this time. Women were transferred out of their husband’s patriline when married, and thus were only seen as temporary members of their natal family. As such, sons were regarded as of far more lasting importance than daughters, and the birth of a girl was not necessarily celebrated as a joyous occasion.

The role of a Chinese woman through much of the Qing dynasty was best described by the adage xianqi liangmu: virtuous (loyal) wife and good mother. As wives, women had no recourse to divorce, and the commitment to their husband was expected not only during his life but after his death as well. Much has been written about the “cult of chastity” in China, which developed in the Ming and Qing dynasties and was in full flight by the eighteenth century. Widows were expected to live single, respectable lives for the rest of their years, in order to bring honour to their husbands. In some rare and extreme cases widows were encouraged to commit suicide upon the death of their husband, this being the strongest expression of loyalty and commitment to him.

Most women were seen as necessarily linked to the inner realms or private world of the home. This can be seen by a commonly used term for women, nei ren (内人) – which literally means ‘inside people’. In terms of ideology, women were ruled by Confucianism’s ‘three obediences’ and ‘four virtues’. The three

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2 Ibid.
obediences were to her father when a child, to her husband when married, and to her sons when widowed. The four virtues were ‘women’s virtue’, meaning that a woman must know her place and act in complete compliance with the relevant ethical codes; ‘women’s speech’, meaning that a woman should take care with both the amount and nature of her speech; ‘women’s appearance’, meaning that a woman should dress and adorn herself to please her husband; and ‘women’s work’, meaning that a woman must do all her household work well and without complaint.⁶

Marriage was early and essentially universal throughout the late Qing. In almost all cases it was arranged by the parents or older relatives of the men and women involved, and it was not uncommon for brides and grooms to first meet each other on the day of the wedding. Marriage was also exogamous, meaning occurring with partners outside the village, lineage, or clan. As a rule, post-marital residence was patrilocal, and the conflict that occurred between newly married women and their mothers-in-law in the patrilocal home is a common theme in Chinese literature and theatre.⁷

Marriage was generally used by elites to indicate and to shore up status. The purposes and significance of dowry and bride-price varied across social classes, but among the upper classes a high dowry was used as an indication that it was a fair exchange and that the woman in question was not merely being sold. Unlike the lower classes, where bride-price was often higher than the dowry due to an awareness that the patrilineal family was purchasing the


bride’s labour, within the upper classes dowries tended to be the more substantial of the two figures. Marriages were considered monogamous for women, but not necessarily so for men. Men with sufficient means could buy one or more concubines or ‘second wives’, especially if the primary wife had not been successful in producing a son. Divorce could be initiated by men but not women. Even so, it was rare.  

Girls did not have access to formal schooling in the same way that boys did. Indeed, it was not until 1907 that the Qing government finally made formal education legal for women. In the late imperial period girls in wealthier homes did, however, have access to books such as home manuals and the Confucian classics. In addition, some girls had access to schooling provided by Christian missionary groups. A very select few of the girls educated in these missionary schools even went on to receive tertiary education in the United States before the downfall of the Qing. This handful of women came back to China in the early twentieth century and found themselves in an extremely unusual position in society, with the likes of Liang Qichao holding them up as examples to the nation. 

At a broad symbolic level, women under the late Qing were burdened with being seen as indicative of the fate of the nation. In times of periodic dynastic decline or natural disaster, it was common to point fingers at women, whose improper behaviour was seen to be directly linked to the downfall of the country. Imperial scholars “established a clear teleology: good women = good nation.”

This connection between gender and national politics is, of course, not exclusive to China, nor was this connection a fleeting one within history of

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9 Mann, ‘Grooming a Daughter for Marriage: Brides and Wives in the Mid-Qing Period’.
11 Ibid.
12 Louise Edwards, ‘Policing the Modern Woman’. 
Towards the end of the Qing, Chinese women came to be implicated in the re-invention of the Chinese citizen or subject. Understandings of a woman’s place in society were caught up in broader anxieties about the changes taking place in China, and reformers such as Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei discussed this issue as part of their reflections on China’s current state and their visions for China’s future. Various potential roles for women were put forward, and the discussion remained heated well after the fall of the dynasty.

Republican period

The Republican period (1911-1949) saw an increase in urbanisation and commerce in China. The treaty ports such as Shanghai swelled as both Chinese and foreigners were attracted to the commercial opportunities that presented themselves, and these ports developed into international, highly modern trading cities. The Republican period has been described as the “Golden Age of Chinese capitalism” and the “Golden Age of the bourgeoisie”. Within the urban centres, the period saw a rapid rise in commercial space, in products on the market, in advertising, in disposable

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15 Ibid. See also Duara, The Regime of Authenticity: Timelessness, Gender and National History in Modern China’.


income for many, and consequently in consumerism. A group resembling a middle class arose – white-collar professionals who held jobs in the more modern business and industrial sectors.\(^{19}\)

The rise of markets and consumer culture in Republican China had particular effects on women. First, women were put in the role of modern consumers. Urban women of means were depicted as and became purchasers of fashionable clothes and accessories and other consumer luxuries. Urban wives and mothers were told to be educated, enlightened, ‘scientific’ consumers when it came to introducing into their homes foreign products like milk and yoghurt.\(^{20}\) This was in keeping with the establishment of a new societal order that, as Wen-hsin Yeh observes, “entailed both a new articulation of the gendered differences between men and women, and a modern conception of the spatial demarcation between the public and the private, between work and home.”\(^{21}\) In this newly emergent culture of consumption, women were moulded into ‘household managers’ and men into white-collar workers.\(^{22}\) Second, women themselves became commodified. The billboards of the new advertising age were often adorned with beautiful, sexualised women, ready to be consumed.\(^{23}\) The popularity of the courtesan rose during this time, particularly the glamorous Shanghai variety. This creature was a decidedly marketable and marketed variety of woman, who developed connoisseurship and consumption to the level of an art.\(^{24}\)

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\(^{19}\) Wen-hsin Yeh, ‘Shanghai Modernity: Commerce and Culture in a Republican City’, *China Quarterly*, 150 (June 1997), p. 393.
\(^{21}\) Ibid, p. 394.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{23}\) Edwards, ‘Policing the Modern Woman’.
As this trend towards greater urbanisation and consumerism developed, cities became focal points of Republican-era intellectuals and reformers, including participants in the so-called ‘May Fourth’ and ‘New Culture’ movements. Reflective of the varying ideological and political threads that constituted these movements, intellectuals’ responses to the rise of cities ranged from concern about the attendant social ills of crime, alienation and unemployment to seeing cities as engines of modernisation that would motor China to a more glorious and fitting place in the world. Some bemoaned a loss of ‘Chineseness’ that these cosmopolitan cities represented, but others welcomed such internationalisation.25

On another axis, iconoclastic New Culture Movement intellectuals saw the repressive, conservative, hierarchical Confucian extended family as at the heart of China’s inability to innovate and modernise. The nuclear, conjugal family was put forward as a more enlightened option.26 Most reformers also felt that a wholesale shift from arranged marriages to free-choice marriages, otherwise known as ‘love-matches’, was more appropriate to the modern world they sought to craft.27 One contributor to the popular journal Jiating Yanjiu (Family Research), Liao Shu’an, advocated marriage based on the “parties’ own choice; minimum age limits; minimal pomp and circumstance; establishing of lives and households separate from the da jiating (extended family); cooperative but independent; divorce permissible; monogamy for both parties; and shared child-rearing responsibilities.”28 The intellectual’s desires for the rise of the nuclear family was to some extent being realised by the white-collar professionals whose ranks were growing during this time. As cities like

25 Susan Mann, ‘Urbanization and Historical Change in China’, Modern China, 10/1 (1984), pp. 79-113; Bergère, ‘Civil Society and Urban Change in Republican China’; Mann, ‘Urbanization and Historical Change in China’;
27 Ibid.
Shanghai developed, “the ideal of the small family took its proper place as a building block within the corporate compounds such as those constructed by the Bank of China, thereby laying the foundation for a new urban middle-class society.”

Many intellectuals were concerned with lifting the situation of women so that they were able to contribute to the overall national task of modernisation – how could the nation modernise and advance when half of the population were shackled by bound feet and restrictive family practices? Reformers also sought to bring women onside to support the arguments they had formed on the needed ideological and social changes, particularly those affecting the family unit. Meanwhile, Communists in the countryside and cities sought to lift their numbers by drawing women to the cause with promises of liberation.

Chinese women were seen as particularly valuable symbols available for appropriation. While I have mentioned this in relation to the imperial period, it was no less true of the Republican era. As Prasenjit Duara put it, the representation of woman, in body and spirit, is “a very significant site upon which regimes and elites in China responsible for charting the destiny of the nation have sought to locate the unchanging essence and moral purity of that nation.” The terms “New Woman” or “Modern Girl” were invoked during this period to describe and politicise the ‘modern woman’ of the time. This modern woman was initially depicted as an educated, enlightened figure, who was independent, politically aware, and patriotic. She soon came to be ‘corrupted’

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29 Yeh, 'Shanghai Modernity: Commerce and Culture in a Republican City', p. 394.
31 Edwards, 'Policing the Modern Woman'.
32 Duara, ‘The Regime of Authenticity: Timelessness, Gender and National History in Modern China’, p. 296.
33 Sarah Stevens separates the features of womanhood discussed into two distinct archetypes, one of which she has named the New Woman and the other the Modern Girl. See Sarah E. Stevens, 'Figuring Modernity: the New Woman and the Modern Girl', *NWSA Journal*, 15/3 (2003), pp. 82-104.
34 Edwards, 'Policing the Modern Woman'.
by commercial interests, and in many ways the image of the new woman of the later 1920s and 1930s resembled the frivolous internationalised ‘Flapper’. Modern, commercialised, and international, this figure’s morals, attire, sexual behaviour, and occupational roles came under attack. Reformist intellectuals had envisaged a new kind of Chinese woman who was modernised yet untainted by the perils of modernisation – the turn of events was thus disappointing for them. Some scholars argue that this debate was not so much about women as about the intellectual classes’ concern with maintaining or reclaiming a public voice, something they felt keenly was being lost to the new groups with power – those in commercial and military circles.\(^\text{35}\)

The various editions of the legal codes of the Guomindang (Nationalist) government in place during the Republican period introduced significant changes to the legal rights and legal position of women. Women came to be legally considered full autonomous natural persons, with free choice and free will – including in the realm of selection of marriage partners. Women could inherit equally, own land, and have consensual unmarried sex (legally, but not socially), and could even legally work as prostitutes if so desired. After several alterations to the codes over the first few years of Nationalist rule, they were also theoretically permitted to initiate a divorce. As Philip C. Huang notes, however, these legal changes also removed basic protections from women, the result of which varied along class lines. For some middle- and upper-class women who had the economic and social wherewithal to support life choices such as divorce and the subsequent single life, much new scope was opened up by the new codes. But for the vast majority of women who were

economically and socially dependent on men, these legal changes offered little.  

In fact, while men were waxing lyrical about the ideal family unit and the ideal wife, and while legal changes theoretically lifted their position in society, many women found that in reality the situation did not change all that much. While there may have been a growth in public romantic sentiment, marriages were still early and basically universal, and the overwhelming majority continued to be arranged, exogamous, and patrilocal, with dowry and bride-price still in existence. Divorce, although now legal for women, remained highly stigmatised. As such, no matter how marriage had been entered into in the first place, there was scant way out of a marriage if it did go sour.

Even self-conscious, reforming men continued to conflate the concepts of woman and wife, as one’s family role was still seen as core to one’s fulfilment of gender norms. For young intellectual men, both an ideal wife and an ideal woman should be educated, liberal-thinking and independent. Such men were often disappointed to find that primarily due to historical and structural constraints Chinese society lacked a large pool of this kind of women that could be taken as wives. At times these men expressed their frustration publicly, and were upbraided by others among them for laying the blame on the women’s shoulders and not on the society that limited these women’s opportunities.


38 Laura Clarke, ‘An Unnatural State: Views on Celibacy in Funü Zazhi” [unpublished B.A. thesis], (Trinity Hall, University of Cambridge, 1988). Many thanks to Harriet Evans for drawing this source to my attention and kindly posting a copy to me in Australia.

A very small proportion of Chinese women chose at this time to eschew the flawed institution of marriage altogether and live a single life, making what might have been seen as a troubling break from the gender roles seen as central to their identities by both conservatives and reformers alike. A single life meant a celibate life in both senses of the word, as sex outside of marriage was still not socially acceptable for a proper woman.\textsuperscript{40} By far, these women were ones of education and means. A study of \textit{Funû Zazhi} magazine in the 1920s and 1930s shows that “advocacy of celibacy… was invariably identified with the educated echelons, resulting from increased educational opportunities and social awareness. For the ‘new woman’, pursuit of a career, intellectual activity or hobby might take precedence over the desire to marry and raise a family.”\textsuperscript{41} Such women, who put career and learning ahead of marriage and family, came to be known as the ‘Third Sex’. Women, being defined by marriage, lay in somewhat unknown and unclassifiable terrain if they consciously refrained from it.\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{Mao era}

On coming to power in 1949 the Chinese Communist Party was overwhelmingly constituted of rural-dwellers with minimal formal education, and it was almost “instinctively anti-urban and anti-intellectual”.\textsuperscript{43} A primary goal of the CCP was to turn cities from ‘parasitical’ sites of consumption to producing or productive centres. They sought to mould cities that did not have the social


\textsuperscript{40} Laura Clarke, ‘An Unnatural State: Views on Celibacy in Funû Zazhi’.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, p. 33.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, pp. 40-42.

and economic ills seen to plague cities worldwide, such as alienation, crime, and consumerism. In order to achieve the above aims, comprehensive administrative networks were developed around both urban dwellers’ places of residence and their places of work.\(^44\) The household registration system (\textit{hukou}), which became widespread after 1958, required that residents register the people living at a particular address with local security bureaus, and that individuals keep records of their residential status with them at all times. The system acted as a built in barrier against migration, particularly between urban and rural areas. As a result, populations in Chinese cities were more stable than in most other countries. The system also monitored the activities of local residents and provided them with a range of social services.

Most urban adults, including the majority of urban women, were employed. Through their employment they found themselves located in another system of management. The ‘work unit’, or \textit{danwei} in Chinese, was for many decades a pervasive and comprehensive system of control and of distribution of services by the state. It allocated housing, paid pensions, often operated child-care centres, and provided basic health care amongst other things. It also kept records of the personal lives of its employees, and in many areas had the capacity to intervene in these personal lives.

While many of Mao’s policies suggest he was concerned about female emancipation, the needs of women as a group were always subordinated to what were seen to be the needs of the Chinese population as a whole.\(^45\) In addition, resistance borne of thousands of years of patriarchal culture made full commitment to any new women-centred measures difficult. At the same time, the state argued that women did not need to agitate for women’s rights, as the

state would do that for them. Women’s own self-led emancipation was seen to hold potential moral and social dangers.  

During the first decades of Mao’s rule women’s legal rights and social opportunities increased compared with previous decades. They gained increased access to basic education and consequently their literacy rates improved. According to data from an interview survey by Martin King White and William L. Parish, urban girls who started their education between the years 1949 and 1953 received an average of eight years of schooling. This compared to just over four years for their mother’s generation (girls starting school between 1918 and 1928) and about six years for those beginning schooling between 1939 and 1948. Furthermore, the gap between the average education levels of urban men and women closed to a level of almost parity between 1949 and 1963. Urban women’s participation in the paid workforce increased to very high levels.

One of the first pieces of legislation introduced by the new Communist government was the Marriage Law of the People’s Republic of China, promulgated in 1950. This law attempted to do a number of things, the crux of which was to provide a legal basis for the abolition of what were considered ‘feudal’ marriage and courtship practices in China. Foremost here was specifying that mate choice should be up to the individuals involved, who should not be forced to marry someone against their will. The end of arranged marriages, envisaged by reformers in the May Fourth period, was now to be enforced through law. Women’s rights to divorce were also enshrined in law.

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46 This is an issue captured by Prasenjit Duara, who states, “Like many other early twentieth-century patriarchal nationalisms, women were to be liberated for and by the nation; they were to embody the nation, not to be active agents shaping it.” See Duara, ‘The Regime of Authenticity: Timelessness, Gender and National History in Modern China’, p. 298.


48 Whyte and Parish, Urban Life in Contemporary China, p. 198.

49 Croll, Chinese Women since Mao, p. 5.
The 1950 law has been seen by many scholars as heralding a sudden and complete unidirectional change in marriage practices.\textsuperscript{50} While it might not provide an all-encompassing explanation for all the changes and continuities in the institution of marriage in China, it is an important piece of legislation which was a central feature on the marriage landscape in the early Mao era and beyond.

A major campaign was launched in 1953 to publicise and enforce the Marriage Law in the cities and the countryside. The 1950 law and the 1953 campaign not only sought to abolish arranged marriages but sought to effect other changes in marriage practices too. The CCP rallied against flashy wedding feasts as well as dowries and bride-price, calling them feudal customs. Marrying at a later age was encouraged, to make sure young female labour was not lost to domestic work, and in an effort to eradicate the practice of child marriages. The 1950 law set the minimum age for marriage at 18 for women and 20 for men. Divorce was also made more accessible, and equally so for both men and women. That said, requests for divorce were not automatically granted.

In the early and mid 1950s, the initiatives introduced by the state with regard to marriage had moderate success. Young men and women were able to appeal against parental involvement in setting up their marriages, and unhappily married couples were able in many cases to divorce. But as it became clear to the government that some of the measures could alienate its support base, especially among rural men, enforcement of the law took a back seat.\textsuperscript{51} Neil Diamant has noted, for example, that divorce rose in the early period around


\textsuperscript{51} Platte, 'Divorce Trends and Patterns in China: Past and Present', p. 432.
when the publicity campaign was being run – especially in rural areas – but fell back after the campaign was wound down.\textsuperscript{52}

Marriage continued to be basically universal throughout the Mao period, although the average age at marriage for both men and women rose incrementally year on year. Ansley Coale gives the average age at first marriage for a woman in the 1940s as 18.5 years.\textsuperscript{53} In Whyte and Parish’s study of life in urban China, for those who married prior to 1949 the average age at marriage for a female was a 19.6 years and for a male it was 22.6 years. These ages increased to 20.5 and 24.1 years for marriages occurring between 1949 and 1957, and to 21.7 and 25.4 years for marriages between 1958 and 1965.\textsuperscript{54} One influence on the comparatively larger increases in age at marriage during the late 1960s and early 1970s was the upheaval and disruption to the normal life course of many young urban men and women during the Cultural Revolution. Another influence, which was perhaps more significant, was that during this time the state put forward ‘advised ages for marriage’ of around 25 to 29 or 30 for men and 23 to 27 for women. Members of society were encouraged to support ‘later marriages’ in line with these guidelines.\textsuperscript{55} The table over the page (Table 1) shows average age at marriage for women from 1949 to 1979.

\textsuperscript{54} Whyte and Parish, \textit{Urban Life in Contemporary China}, p. 113.
\textsuperscript{55} Croll, \textit{The Politics of Marriage in Contemporary China}; Whyte and Parish, \textit{Urban Life in Contemporary China}. 60
Table 1. Mean female age at first marriage and average percentage of women who married at age 23 (the official “late marriage” age) or older, China, 1949-1979

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mean age at First Marriage</th>
<th>% of females who married at 23 or older</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total - China</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: One in 1,000 Fertility Survey (1982) presented in Pi-Chao Chen, ‘China’s Other Revolution: Findings from the One in 1,000 Fertility Survey’, International Family Planning Perspectives, 10/2 (1984), p. 49.

Despite the passage of the 1950 Marriage Law, many urban marriages during the Mao era continued to be influenced by the parents of the bride and groom, although not nearly as directly as prior to the passage of the law. The table below (Table 2), derived from the Chinese Five Cities Study of 1985, clearly demonstrates that the proportion of marriages that are formally considered ‘arranged marriages’ fell very sharply in the first decades of Mao’s rule, to less than one percent. On the other hand, while the proportion of marriages resulting from introductions by family members also fell over this time, it fell at a gentler rate and led to about a seventh of new marriages during the first half decade after Mao’s death. As seen in the table over the page (Table 2), close to half of all new marriages in the final decade of Mao’s rule resulted from introductions by friends, and this rose in the early post-Mao period to fully half of all new marriages.⁵⁶

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Table 2. Methods through which urban females met their spouses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arranged completely by parents</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>11.05</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduced by family members</td>
<td>26.44</td>
<td>24.58</td>
<td>18.35</td>
<td>15.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduced by friends</td>
<td>21.36</td>
<td>37.97</td>
<td>45.65</td>
<td>50.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met by themselves</td>
<td>9.72</td>
<td>25.03</td>
<td>34.59</td>
<td>32.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


During the Mao era, young men and women were encouraged by the state to find mates of good class background and good political bent. This was particularly true of the Cultural Revolution decade (1966-76), during which there was increased state involvement in the framing of ideal mates and increased emphasis on class labels. In all cases this ideal mate should be a person of political fervour with a strong commitment to the goals of the Chinese revolution; true love was ‘true socialist love’. However, pragmatism was strong, and material and other pragmatic concerns remained important factors in choosing a spouse. Women expected to at least “match doors and windows”, that is, to find someone of at least equivalent status. In the aftermath of the introduction of the new marriage law, Diamant documents a wide range of cases where both men and women, but particularly women, made use of the new provisions to divorce spouses they were not happy with and ‘upgrade’ to

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58 ‘Class labels’ referred generally to, in the case of young persons, the status of their parents prior to 1949.
better looking, better off models, or with the institution of the *hukou*, simply to better *located* spouses.\textsuperscript{60}

Dating as generally understood in the West was not practiced in the Mao era. Courtship, where present, followed rather than preceded a commitment to marry a person.\textsuperscript{61} And while there was no doubt an element of romanticism involved in this process for many young people, Whyte and Parish stated that even by the 1970s, when it reached the time to make a commitment to marry a person, “there is often an effort to weigh the merits and demerits of a particular prospect in a fairly rational manner. There are not a few cases in our interviews in which a person decided to reject a suitor with whom they were clearly in love because of some defect or flaw and ended up marrying someone more ‘suitable’ in terms of rational criteria, although the feelings for the eventual mate were not as strong as for the rejected suitor.”\textsuperscript{62}

Despite the existence of new socialist cultural frames highlighting women’s equality with men, the view that all women should and would become mothers and wives persisted throughout the Mao period, as did the belief, and reality, that women were the primary carers of children and the primary caretakers of the home.\textsuperscript{63} And with massively increased numbers of women in paid work, most women now found themselves handling the classic ‘double-burden’ of working and caring for a home and family. With the pro-natalist policy of the CCP in operation in the first decades of the Mao era, families could be of substantial size. Although there were some moves toward collective childcare,  


\textsuperscript{63} Harriet Evans, *Women & Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949* (New York: Continuum, 1997).
services were far from comprehensive. However, the ‘later, longer, and fewer’ family planning policy introduced in the 1970s had a significant effect on reducing women’s fertility and therefore childcare burden.

Mao’s well-known claim that times had changed and women and men were the same played out to the extreme during the Cultural Revolution, particularly in the political and work expectations of women. Perhaps the most well known articulation of this vision was the Iron Girls. Iron Girls were women, especially young women, who were thoroughly committed to the cause of the revolution and who exhibited this by taking on the toughest of jobs – usually the domain of men – and devoting themselves to excelling at them. They dressed in the same style of drab clothing as their male colleagues, and eschewed capitalistic expressions of femininity such as personal adornment and styling. Thus, rather than emphasising typically feminine qualities, the ideal woman came to be associated with the androgynous revolutionary, contributing to Mao’s vision of a socialist nation. In the memoirs and recollections of many women who were in their teens and twenties at that time, they recall a sense of not being aware of their own femininity.64 Women were, however, still restricted and defined in many ways by their relationships to men. For example, the same women who wrote of their sense of not being particularly gender aware growing up during the Cultural Revolution also wrote of knowing and being afraid of the fact that once they married they would lose part of their own independent self-identity, and forever be referred to as “so-and-so’s wife”.65

In the later years of Mao’s rule, the asexualisation of the model woman such as was the case with the Iron Girls made the question of what made an ideal wife an interesting one. On one level, there was the traditional conflation of ‘ideal

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65 Ibid, p. 17.
woman’ and ‘ideal wife’, where a woman was expected to be committed to the fulfilment of domestic tasks, including raising children, and was also expected to be sexually available to her husband. At the same time there was another, newer image of the ‘ideal woman’, whose domestic contributions were rendered invisible and who was depicted as almost entirely public-facing. In this vein, an ideal wife was the same as any other ideal citizen – hard at work in the productive, politicised sphere, committed to the ideals of the revolution. One way of managing the conflicting obligations brought about by the multiple discourses on what a wife should be and do was to hope that the community would provide house-keeping and child-care support. This was not always forthcoming. Another way of ‘managing’ this conflict, if you were a single woman, was to simply put off getting married in the first place. Unfortunately, since marriage remained the only socially accepted arena for women’s sexual activity, this limited the opportunities available for unmarried women.66

When it came to education, the situation of women in education improved as a result of the policies first put into place during the Mao era. The 1987 One Percent Population Survey provides some useful data on educational levels by age group and gender, a decade after the death of Mao. The data indicates that between 1949 and 1981, the ratio of females to males in primary and secondary schools across China rose steadily.67 Girls went from making up 25% of the national secondary school student body in 1949 to 40% in 1981.68 By 1987 in urban areas parity in primary school and high school education attainment had largely been achieved.69 The one-child policy was introduced in 1979 and led to daughters of urban families in particular becoming more highly valued. From the mid to late 1980s onwards, as daughters who were only-

66 Harriet Evans, Women & Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949, p. 41.
69 Ibid, p. 339 and p. 341. While high school attainment was still marginally in favour of boys, at a ratio of 1.06 this is likely in keeping with overall gender imbalances within the population.
children reached school age, even their participation in higher education began to rival the participation rates for boys.\textsuperscript{70} The Chinese Government white paper released in 2005 states “the number of girl students in institutions of higher learning nationwide reached 6,090,000, accounting for 45.7% of all students in such schools and an increase of 10.3 percentage points over 1995.”\textsuperscript{71} Within the urban cohort, female students may even have outweighed male students.

**Post-Mao period**

As is well known, after the death of Mao Zedong the fundamental shift from a command to a market economy was accompanied by an increased availability of the mass media and the emergence of a culture of consumerism, taking advantage of the increased availability of consumer goods and services and newly acquired private income streams.\textsuperscript{72} While not all urban residents were in the position to adorn their homes with new gadgets such as televisions and refrigerators, the proportion that were certainly rose over this period. A “new middle class” had the means to acquire personal property – including their own private housing.\textsuperscript{73} Members of the new middle class included those working in the new non-state sector, particularly the wage-earning white-collar workers employed by joint ventures and foreign-owned enterprises as well as private

\textsuperscript{70} 中华人民共和国国家统计局, 中国统计年鉴 1996 (北京: 中国统计出版社, 1996).


business owners and operators and middle-ranking officials within the state sector or bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{74}

During the first decade of reform urban hukou-holders retained many of their rights to subsidies, and thus continued to have a somewhat privileged existence relative to their rural neighbours.\textsuperscript{75} The state, too, retained a reach into the private and work lives of residents – both urban and rural – that was not in keeping with typical free-market capitalism. While the power and influence of the household registration system eroded into the 1990s, population planning increased observation and compliance mechanisms on one of the most private of all matters: conception. In this way, the state combined with capitalism and the Chinese family to create a triumvirate of power structures relevant to the urbanite.\textsuperscript{76}

In terms of the images of women during this time, while the Cultural Revolution encouraged women to be ‘as good as’ men by being like them, the post-Mao reform period saw a backlash to this approach and a move to a much more classically feminine, essentialised ideal of womanhood.\textsuperscript{77} A key in this model was the rebirth and adaptation of the traditional model of Chinese femininity encapsulated in the term xianqi liangmu. This idea again became central to models of womanhood in the 1980s and 1990s, although it was redefined to suit the new social and economic circumstances. According to Honig and Hershatter, who studied the lives and images of urban women in the 1980s,

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid. See also Luigi Tomba, ‘Creating an Urban Middle Class: Social Engineering in Beijing’, \textit{The China Journal}, 51(January 2004), pp. 1-26.


“forced subservience was replaced by voluntary acquisition of emotional management skills” in the new reform model of good mother and virtuous wife. In the 1990s, Kathleen Erwin’s research in Shanghai indicates that the model was being further adapted to modern, working, consumerist lifestyles amongst the city’s middle class. The conclusion women came to was that yes, it was of primary importance to be a good wife and more particularly a good mother – but there were ways to make sure this did not conflict too much with your other personal and work goals.

The sexual climate of urban China began to change in the 1970s, and Whyte and Parish report parental opposition to premarital sex declined in the early years of reform. The drastic changes of the post-Mao reforms unsurprisingly held seeds of potential social instability, and the state again held women in particular responsible for sexual morality and family order. This interest, however, did not halt a growth in incidences of premarital sex. Educated urbanites began revising their views on sexual pleasure, and particularly female pleasure. Traditionally, men had been considered initiators and women as playing a passive role. Although this still held true to some extent, the interests of women within the sexual setting increasingly became a topic of conversation.

On the economic front, with the advent of a market economy and more free hiring and firing practices, women were losers in the world of work in the early years of reform. Many women found that in companies’ efforts to increase

78 Honig and Hershatter, Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s, pp. 174-5.
79 Erwin, 'Liberating Sex, Mobilising Virtue', p. 60.
80 See Whyte and Parish, Urban Life in Contemporary China.
81 Evans, Women & Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949.
82 See Pan Suiming, Sexuality in China, trans. Sexuality Southeast Asian Consortium on Gender, and Health (Nakornpathom: Southeast Asian Consortium on Gender, Sexuality and Health, 2005).
84 Evans, Women & Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949, p. 102; Pan, Sexuality in China; Jankowiak, Sex, Death and Hierarchy in a Chinese City: An Anthropological Account, p. 234.
efficiency and reduce costs they were the first to be asked or told to leave their work posts and return to their homes. This was regardless of the fact that most married women – some figures suggest 84% – expressed a wish to work. In addition, women faced discrimination at the hiring stage. State laws which sought to protect women in the workforce had the unhappy side effect of actually encouraging discrimination against these women in terms of hiring and retaining them as staff. Special protections for women during times of menstruation and pregnancy, as well as recognition of family commitments, meant that women were presumed to be bad investments as labour compared to their male counterparts.

In the early post-Mao years, marriage continued to be basically universal. The One in 1,000 Fertility Survey of 1982, which provides data up to the early reform years, shows that “virtually 100 percent of women in China marry by about age 30.” This is an observation which holds across more than 50 years of Chinese records. Marriage, in the end, was a crucial rite of passage for Chinese men and women, and was presumed as the ideal state for a grown person.

In the first half decade after Mao’s death, the trend towards a rise in marriage age, which had been almost continuous since the 1940s, stagnated or even temporarily reversed. This is indicated by data from the One in 1,000 Fertility Survey presented in the table over the page (Table 3).

87 Woo, ‘Chinese Women Workers: The Delicate Balance between Protection and Equality’.
88 Coale, ‘Marriage and Childbearing in China since 1940’, p. 834.
89 Ibid.
Table 3. Mean female age at first marriage and average percentage of women who married at age 23 (the official “late marriage” age) or older, China, 1977-1981

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mean Age at First Marriage</th>
<th>% Married at 23 or older</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: One in 1,000 Fertility Survey (1982) presented in Pi-Chao Chen, ‘China’s Other Revolution: Findings from the One in 1,000 Fertility Survey’, International Family Planning Perspectives, 10/2 (1984), p. 49.

Davis and Harrell attribute this to a change in government policy.91 As mentioned earlier, in the 1970s, the state encouraged delayed marriages. The new Marriage Law promulgated in 1980 set the legal minimum ages for marriage at 20 for women and 22 for men – an increase of two years for both sexes – and stipulated that these ages not be interfered with. One may reasonably expect that a lifting of legal marriage ages would lead to a lifting of average ages at first marriage. However, some argue that prior to this, young couples who had wished to get married had not been granted permission to do so by their work units or local officials as these groups were attempting to support the state policy of delayed marriage. With the legal changes it suddenly became rather more difficult for them to deny young couple’s desires to marry. The Two in 1,000 Fertility Survey conducted in 1988 indicates that falls in marriage age bottomed out in the mid 1980s.92 The same survey,

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unsurprisingly, noted a drop in average numbers of births per woman following the introduction of the one-child policy beginning in 1979. Nonetheless, motherhood was still considered a defining characteristic of adult womanhood.

While the majority of marriages taking place in this period were technically free-choice marriages, the continuing absence of a fully-fledged dating culture meant that finding a partner often still involved a considerable degree of matchmaking by others. Honig and Hershatter report that in a sample of Beijing marriages of 1982, matchmakers (largely friends and relatives) played a role in 60% of all marriages. Not all of the matchmakers were acquaintances and relatives, however. By 1980, as a result of both demand and of market changes, private marriage introduction agencies had begun to open up in several of China’s major cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin. Kathleen Erwin in her mid 1990s Shanghai study reports that these agencies were increasingly popular, especially among men and women in their 30s and 40s. On top of this, the expansion of the magazine industry in the 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of ‘personal ads’ by people seeking a partner.

What were all these men and women looking for in a potential spouse? Firstly, during the reform era there appeared to be little change to the general preference for female hypergamy. For example, Margery Wolf reported in the mid 1980s that 68% of the Beijing men she interviewed were not willing to marry a woman with more education than they themselves had. What constituted ‘marrying up’, however, arguably took on increasingly economic,

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94 Gail Hershatter examines this issue in greater detail in Hershatter, 'Making a Friend: Changing Patterns of Courtship in Urban China'.
95 Honig and Hershatter, Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s, p. 83.
96 Ibid, p. 85.
97 Erwin, 'Liberating Sex, Mobilising Virtue', p. 78.
market-based connotations during this period, in addition to pre-existing concerns with regard to education and social position. Pragmatism continued to be a guiding principle for many men but particularly for women wishing to marry. The occupation and income of a potential husband were scrutinised, particularly in light of the increased opportunities for a materially comfortable life presented by the market economy. Survey material collected by William Parish and James Farrer shows that in the 1980s one-fourth of all urban women had strict expectations about the education and occupation of potential husbands.

William Jankowiak and Parish and Farrer separately provide lists of characteristics desired in a potential spouse in the late 1980s and early 1990s – Jankowiak in urban Inner Mongolia (Hohhot) and Parish and Farrer in several major cities across China. Jankowiak concludes that an ideal husband was seen as “a man who is tall, healthy, kind, handsome, strong, intelligent, brave, well-mannered… and one who has status and can provide for a family.”

By comparison, men wanted “a woman who is beautiful, tall, healthy, soft, kind, well-mannered, loyal, virtuous, and one who is skilled in domestic crafts and can take care of children.” Based on 1991 data, Parish and Farrer report that “when asked the characteristics that are important in picking a mate, women reply that the most important is character (54%), followed by education (18%), occupation (10%), and appearance (7%). For men, the relevant percentages are appearance (15%), education (12%), and occupation (8%).

A sense of romance also was expressed in the context of the development of a modern culture in urban China, and as an extension of the already blossoming companionate ideal. In a 1989-90 study 88% of the urbanites surveyed agreed

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102 Ibid.
that marriage must involve love.\textsuperscript{104} A growing market economy encouraged the purchase of consumer goods as expressions of romantic love.

Marriage age was on the rise again in the 1990s. This was true at the national level to a greater extent than for Beijing. Even so, the average age at first marriage remained higher in Beijing than was the case nationally.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Age at first marriage (years of age)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>22.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>22.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>22.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>22.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>22.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>23.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>23.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>23.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>23.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A number of exceptions to the marital norms became more widespread in the post-Mao reform years, namely unwedded cohabitation, divorce, and extramarital affairs. Unmarried cohabitation, although still frowned upon by most senior figures and the older generation, increased in popularity, particularly into the 1990s. Some urban educated cohabitators saw it as a more true and genuine expression of love and affection than the increasingly high-priced and extravagant weddings that had become common.\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105} Erwin, 'Liberating Sex, Mobilising Virtue', p. 91.
Divorce was also on the way up. It had been made somewhat easier to obtain by revisions to the Marriage Law in 1980 (which came into effect in 1981). Permissible reasons for divorce were clarified in the revisions to the Marriage Law passed in 2001, and the process itself was simplified in 2003.106 ‘Lack of mutual affection’, as we would term it, is now specified as a legitimate reason for which to seek, and be granted, divorce.107 Statistics suggest the new opportunities for divorce were taken up by many unhappy couples. Figures from 1986 show that the numbers of divorce court cases in China grew steadily from 1979 to 1986 – from 0.21 cases per thousand population to more than double that at 0.43 per thousand.108 Writing on divorce among her urban, educated, 30-40 year-old cohort in China, Zhang Xinxin observed that fully half of her friends “were facing either divorce or remarriage in early 1988.”109 She argued that the rise in divorces was not an outcome of different marital problems in this new age, but a reflection of different methods employed to deal with these problems, and that none of the people she knew wished to be single over the longer term – they all wanted to settle in a loving, satisfying relationship.110 Speaking of the mid to late 1990s, Parish and Farrer argue that in the major cities of Beijing and Shanghai, some 20% of all marriages end in divorce. They also note that these divorces are largely initiated by women.111

Extramarital affairs are certainly not simply a direct product of the reform period, though data prior to this period is hard to come by. Data collected by Zha Bo

110 Ibid, pp. 59-64.
111 Parish and Farrer, ‘Gender and Family’, p. 266.
and Geng Wenxiu in urban areas in the late 1980s shows that 29% of men and 23% of women in a large sample were willing to admit they had had an affair. The actual percentage could be substantially higher, given people’s reticence to be open on such a topic. Extramarital affairs are now depicted in the Chinese media as being reasonably common – and anecdotal evidence does nothing to contradict this assertion.

Conclusion

Today’s Chinese cities are sites of ever faster changes. Whole suburbs appear to pop up overnight, intra-urban rail networks are rapidly adding lines, and international chain stores are appearing on almost every corner. Centres of commerce, higher learning and government, Chinese cities also provide an important conduit through which China interacts with the outside world. And while the government retains a substantial degree of control over the lives of urban residents, the social and economic freedoms they have access to are increasing.

The role Chinese cities have come to play as centres of capitalistic consumption and international exposure provides an interesting backdrop to understanding the rise of the so-called ‘new middle class’. Although a white-collar, commercial class had its antecedents in the Republican period, such a group disappeared in the intervening years of Maoist rule. It was not until the end of the command economy and the expansion of well-paid professional and

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commercial opportunities that a middle class was given the chance to develop into an economic and, as we will see, social force.

The adage xianqi liangmu (virtuous wife, good mother) has been a defining trope of womanhood throughout China’s past and present, although the specific aspects that are understood to denote fulfilment of these twin roles have changed over time. The universality of marriage in China made this prescription for proper, ‘normal’ womanhood all the more powerful.

Although still early compared to developed Western nations, marriage ages have steadily crept up over the past sixty years.114 This has particularly been the case with educated urbanites. Over this same period of time, arranged marriages have gone from being extremely common to quite rare. The nature of these free-choice marriages is perhaps different to what one might expect. Even into the reform period, the lack of an established dating culture has left many young men and women reliant on an updated form of the old ‘introduction culture’ which characterised courtship during the Mao period. Other changes to the marriage model have been increases in divorces since the beginning of the post-Mao era, a consequent rise in remarriage, and a rise in cohabitation, alongside changes in sexual practices and norms.

The extent to which these observed features of urban life, women’s position, and marriage have continued to change into the first decade of the twenty-first century, and the extent to which they influence both the rhetoric about and the romantic experiences of high-status women, will be explored in the following chapters.

114 In the case of Australia the national bureau of statistics reported that the median age of people married in 2007 was 31.6 years for males and 29.3 years for females. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Marriages, Australia, 2007 (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The report further states that "Median age at marriage has been increasing gradually over the past 20 years for both males and females. Since 1988, the median age at marriage has increased by 3.8 years for males and 3.9 years for females. Since 2003, there has been little increase in median age of people getting married, increasing just 0.4 years for males and 0.2 years for females."
Chapter 3: Mate Preference Ideals and Discourses

In the previous chapter, I traced some of the historical and cultural trends that feed into gender norms and mate preferences in present-day urban China. In this chapter, I will examine mate preference ideals and actualities in the contemporary setting, particularly as they relate to highly educated and high-income women. How are ideal marital partners conceived of in urban China today? What qualities make someone desirable as a life partner and what qualities detract from his or her desirability? And how do high-status women stack up against these understandings?

I will first introduce the general features of mate preferences, as indicated by academic studies, the popular press, and marriage agencies. I will also show that women of high status, particularly in terms of education but also in terms of income, are generally portrayed negatively in discussions of what constitutes an ideal marriage partner.

Mate preference in contemporary China

Three types of sources, used together, provide the best basis for approaching the topic of broad mate preferences in China. First, the Chinese popular press portrays images of the ideal and not-so-ideal potential spouse, which single
women and men may or may not subscribe to but which nonetheless provide a context for the formulation of their ideals and biases. Second, the staff and managers at marriage agencies presented me with their experiences of what type of potential marriage partner is desirable and what type is not. Finally, studies conducted within China have surveyed mate preferences of the present and recent past.

**Popular media**

In Chapter 1 I noted the range of print and electronic media that I used as part of my media analysis. In particular it was noted that China is leading the world in new internet subscribers,¹ and that as well as using the internet as a source of formal news content, increasingly internet users are becoming engaged either passively or actively with the phenomena of Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) or message boards. From the range of media outlined, I have drawn out some of the most common images and themes about ideal potential marriage partners, with a particular focus on what is considered the ideal mate in developed *urban* centres. I have focussed on those articles that best distill particular aspects of the imagery.

In terms of the depiction of what women look for in men, three of the major themes are: women have become more materialistic in recent years; women prefer men who are taller, older, and more educated than themselves; and certain professions are more attractive to partner-seeking women. A number of articles highlight the theme that women are becoming more materialistic in their assessment of a man as a good match. One sample article discusses the

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changes occurring in women’s minimum standards for a would-be spouse as real estate prices go up. Although in this article the authors are referring to the city of Qingdao, housing price hikes are widespread throughout urban areas. This article, on the major portal site sina.com, reports that “in one marriage agency in Qingdao, more than 90% of women listed ‘owns real estate’ at top of their list of criteria”. The author argues that this is sensible: although the price of housing has gone up on average 14.4% over the past 12 months, average income has only increased by half that, at 7.7%. The author joked that in the 1950s, women preferred to marry workers; in the 1960s, peasants; in the 1970s, soldiers; in the 1980s, educated men; in the 1990s, rich men; and now women want to marry a man with a title deed!

Another article illustrating women’s ‘materialism’ in mate preference is an advice piece for men seeking girlfriends. In a wry, mocking tone, the author outlines what kind of woman a man in Shanghai can date, based on his personal income. The clear message is that without money and assets, a man is not going to be in the race at all. Women not only want to land a man with both of the above, they expect to be courted with flowers, expensive dinners, chocolates and the like – things even the average man in Shanghai might not be able to afford given the cost of living in that city.

As for the second theme – that women prefer men who are taller, older, and more educated than they are themselves – one of the many articles that make these points traces the shift from “romantic girls” to “realistic women” in terms of outlooks on men as women age. It puts forward four ‘compulsory’ and two

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‘optional’ standards women expected any potential partner to meet.\(^5\) Two of these four compulsory standards were that the man be older than the woman in a partnership and that he should have higher educational qualifications than her. The author claims that “wanting a man older than you is very natural… if the man is older than the woman he’ll have that wise, big-brotherly feeling”. As for the expectation – on the part of both the men and the women – that the man have a higher educational level than the woman, the article simply states this as fact, so natural that it does not even require an explanation.\(^6\)

A website posting by a single woman looking for a partner encapsulates some of the major themes in Chinese women’s mate preference, including the need for a man to be “superior” on most measurable fronts. ‘Anna’ lists no less than ten strict criteria, followed by an elaboration on her views. Her requirements were (in the order listed):

1. Age (born before 1976)
2. Height (taller than her, more than 165cm)
3. Education (tertiary)
4. Self-confidence
5. Sense of responsibility
6. Stable work
7. Ambition
8. Open-mindedness
9. Respect for others
10. Genuine about a lasting partnership\(^7\)

Anna explains that she does not mean to be discriminatory with regards to height, but she really cannot handle someone shorter than 165cm. She also says with regards to her education requirements that she realises this is not a


\(^6\) Ibid.

job advertisement, but for her, tertiary education is necessary to ensure they can communicate well.  

Others give preference to certain professions. The men chosen as China’s most eligible bachelors by the popular *Cosmopolitan* magazine are indicative of what is desirable and what is not when it comes to a man’s job. Most of the 100 men were employed in the upper levels of media and commerce. They were advertising gurus, television presenters, investment bankers, actuaries, company vice-presidents, and lawyers. None of the Beijing bachelors listed were government officials, and only one from Shanghai was.

The online and print media suggest, on the other hand, that men are looking for women who are beautiful (but not *too* beautiful); young; not too ‘strong’ (*lihai*); and not too clever. Physical attractiveness is preeminent in the media’s coverage of men’s mate preference. One popular article, which was published in various forms across most of the major internet portals and other popular sites in China, was supposedly written by an expatriate in Beijing. The author is said to have lived in Beijing for many years, evidenced by his native-level proficiency in written Mandarin. The article gave his observations on what he calls “the mysterious mate preference of Chinese men”. Essentially, his argument is that Chinese men prefer women’s beauty over all other characteristics, and this is partly due to historical models and partly to vanity and the need for external measures of ‘success’.

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8 Ibid.
Other articles observe that marrying a beautiful woman is good, but you shouldn’t marry one who is **too** beautiful or it will cause you trouble.\(^\text{11}\) There are also commentaries from men who have married beautiful women and who think this is a wonderful thing\(^\text{12}\) and interviews with eligible urban bachelors where they profess their ideals of having a well-dressed, beautiful woman as a girlfriend.\(^\text{13}\)

Youthfulness is also consistently depicted as one of the overriding indicators of desirability. Men are said to prefer a potential partner to be younger than them, and the older the man gets, the bigger he expects the gap to be between his and the woman’s age.\(^\text{14}\)

Popular media coverage conveys the notion that men do not like women who are too strong, a sub-set of which is too clever. Both ‘wise’ or ‘intellectual’ women and what the Chinese term ‘superwomen’ (女强人) feature in articles about what kinds of woman a Chinese man should never marry. One article explains that a smart woman may seem appealing in the first instance, but once you get to know her you will discover she has “an ice-cold heart”.\(^\text{15}\) As for a strong or ‘super’ woman, the same article argues that strong women are too much “like men – rough and ambitious”. It warns that “after the honeymoon period has passed, you may slowly find yourself being treated like an accessory, and this really is a feeling any normal man would find hard to


\(^\text{15}\) Anonymous, ‘绝对不能娶回家的八类女人’. 82
A range of other articles and pieces are in agreement with this line. Many, though not all, of Cosmopolitan’s most eligible bachelors baulked when asked whether they would consider dating a strong and/or intellectual woman. Other articles, from a woman’s viewpoint, ask with anguish “why do men always like stupid women?”, and then follow up this question with the reasons some men have given for not being interested in women who are “too smart”.

Although necessarily brief, the above account provides a general sense of the major themes present in the media. These, though, present stereotypes that may or may not be valid. Although they colour or influence the thoughts and decisions of individuals to lesser and greater extents, they do not ipso facto represent the mate preference views of most ordinary people. The two sections which follow will more directly address mate preferences that are actually put forward by Chinese – firstly when registering to seek out a partner through marriage agencies, and secondly when responding to public questionnaires and surveys in academic studies.

**Marriage agency data**

My marriage agency data consists of interviews with two team leaders at conventional marriage agencies, an interview with the owner of a booming online matchmaking service as well as subsequent emails with her staff, and surveys collected from 17 marriage agencies located across four districts in Beijing.¹⁸

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¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁸ 17 complete surveys were collected. The districts visited were Haidian, Chaoyang, Xicheng and Chongwen. More information on the conduct of the survey is included in the methodology section of the introductory chapter.
In my survey of conventional face-to-face style marriage agencies in Beijing, I asked senior staff members the top three traits desired by men and the top three traits desired by women among their clients. With regards to male members’ criteria, fourteen out of seventeen put good looks or “appearance” among their top three. In eight of the completed surveys, this was the first criteria listed. The frequency of this particular criterion was almost double the next most popular, “temperament” – which made it into the top three eight times. “Personality” came in at third, listed five times. All other criteria appeared three or fewer times in the completed surveys. The fifteen criteria put forward by respondents, along with the numbers of times they appeared in respondents’ top-three lists, are listed in Table 5 (over page).
Table 5: Women’s traits most desired by male clients of matchmaking agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality/Criterion</th>
<th>Inclusion in respondent’s Top 3 criteria (no. of respondents)</th>
<th>Proportion of respondents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance (waimao/waibiao) 外貌/外表</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>82.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament (xingge) 性格</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>47.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality (gexing) 个性</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtuousness (zhengzhi) 正直</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level (jiaoyu shuiping) 教育程度</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultured (wenhua xiuyang) 文化修养</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft and gentle (wenrou) 温柔贤惠</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic situation (jingji) 经济状况</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable job (wending gongzuo) 稳定工作</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family background (jiating beijing) 家庭背景</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality (suzhi) 素质</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upbringing (peiyang) 教养</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardworking (qinfen) 勤奋</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morals (daode) 道德</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle (shenghuo fangshi) 生活方式</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The picture of women’s preferences regarding men was quite different (see Table 6, over page).
Eighteen criteria were listed in total, and no single criterion was listed more than ten times. Nothing came close to the importance of “appearance” to men in their ideals. The most popular all related to providing for a family, with the emphasis being largely on material provision. “Successful career” topped the list with nine occurrences, then came “sense of responsibility” (six occurrences).
followed closely by “good basic economic situation” (five occurrences), “income level” (four occurrences), and “family background” (also four occurrences). That the family background of a potential spouse was more important to women than to men may well indicate the continuance of a tradition that married couples have closer relations with the husband’s parents than with the wife’s, an outgrowth of the patrilineal system discussed in the previous chapter.

I had the opportunity to speak at length with two women who were team leaders of marriage agencies in Beijing. One interview was preliminary to the survey, and helped to form the questions that went into the survey. The second interview was with a woman I met while surveying marriage agencies. During the surveying process, this woman had expressed an interest and a willingness to discuss it further. We met about a week afterwards, at a local McDonalds. Mrs. Shi noted that the agency in which she had worked since 2003 had approximately 5,000-6,000 clients of various kinds. They were mostly between 20 and 40 years of age. Mrs. Shi explained that the agency had a high proportion of well-educated clients and clients with good incomes, given the agency’s proximity to both the university and financial districts.

I asked her what, in her experience, women and men looked for in partners. Mrs. Shi replied that female clients tended to emphasise a high level of education and good economic circumstances when they looked for a partner. As for male clients, Mrs. Shi responded quickly, “Beauty! The first thing they look for is definitely beauty.” That a woman was ‘virtuous’ was the other major, yet still secondary, requirement.¹⁹ Mrs. Shi added that men with university educations also tended to prefer women with some higher education.

¹⁹ Virtue in this usage refers particularly to sexual purity or virginity.
Mrs. Shi stated that older singles were the hardest to find matches for. When quizzed on what she meant by “older”, she clarified that she meant people over 35 years of age. She indicated this was particularly important with regards to women’s ages, since many men were concerned about the diminished reproductive capacity of older women. Asked if any other groups faced difficulties, Mrs. Shi replied that men who were 160cm or shorter faced real difficulties, and poor men from the countryside as well as women with PhDs also did not fare well.

In addition to in-person match-making agencies, online or internet agencies have been growing in significance in recent years. There are various types of online match-making services. One group of online services essentially mirrors conventional in-person agencies. The service retains a higher ratio of staff to clients, and the staff are involved in helping members to locate and meet suitable candidates. Service fees for this sort of agency are generally higher. The second group consists of client-driven services. Essentially, individuals register with a website, post a profile of themselves, and then initiate and receive contacts from other registered members. These services are either free or low-cost. 20 Throughout this thesis I will refer to the first group as formal “online marriage agencies” and the second as self-directed “online dating websites”.

I conducted an online interview with the head of one of Beijing’s largest online marriage agencies. The agency had over 20,000 registered clients. When asked what male clients tended to look for, Mrs. Hong replied “youthful, beautiful, and bright”. Female clients looked for men who were “mature, handsome, and talented/successful.” 21 She said that short men and poor men found it particularly difficult to find a mate. When asked whether women with

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20 Further detail on this topic is provided in Chapter 7.
21 Online (instant chat) interview, 11 July 2005.
PhDs faced any difficulties, or women with high incomes, Mrs. Hong responded in the affirmative, saying “men are always self-abased when they face women with PhDs or high incomes”, which acts as a stumbling block to their partnering.

In short, the information from marriage agencies is consistent with mass media reports. Men, it appears, do look for beauty first and foremost in a potential partner. Women’s virtue, too, is an important consideration for many men. Overall, it could be said that men look for women who are visually appealing, gentle, and well-mannered. Women, on the other hand, reputedly place highest importance on criteria which indicate how good a man would be at providing for the woman and any future family. Looks, or at least height, is also a consideration of women, given that staff from both the in-person and online marriage agencies I spoke with put forward short men as one of the most difficult groups of all for which to find a partner.

**Academic surveys and studies**

Academic surveys conducted within China provide a statistical basis for preliminary conclusions. Studies in this field are relatively recent, beginning in the past quarter century and growing somewhat in numbers within the past decade. Li Yu, Xu Anqi and Lu Jianmin are some of the most well-known early explorers of this field. The established Beijing academic Li Yinhe has also touched upon mate preference in her studies of sex and relationships.

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Many of these studies employ textual analysis to examine marriage advertisements placed by men and women in newspapers and magazines. A number of researchers in the 1990s and early 2000s have examined both the self-representations made by those who have submitted advertisements and the requests these people have made of their future spouses. New researchers are slowly applying this approach to advertisements on the internet.

Only a handful of researchers have conducted their own surveys or interviews of substantial number of Chinese for the purposes of mate preference research. Prime among these data sets are studies of 3,200 already married individuals in Shanghai and Harbin conducted in 1996, 911 married couples in Shanghai conducted in 1997, and 800 young men and women in Shanghai and Chengdu conducted in 2001. Below I will first briefly examine some of the results of the surveys and present my own interpretations, as well as those of the Chinese scholars involved.

The findings of particular note are:

- **Men wanted women who were:**
  1. respectful and filial;
  2. kind and considerate;
  3. soft and caring;

- **Women wanted men who were:**
  1. respectful and filial;
  2. healthy;
  3. capable;

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28 李煜 and 徐安琪, ‘择偶模式和性别偏好研究’, p. 3; 李煜 and 徐安琪, 婚姻市场中的青年择偶.
29 李煜 and 徐安琪, 婚姻市场中的青年择偶.
30 Ibid.
- Women named more things as important when compared with men. That is, women appeared significantly more selective and thorough in their setting of base requirements than men;\textsuperscript{31} and
- With regards to age, both men and women believed that the man should be either the same age or older than the woman. No one sought a partnership where the woman was older than the man.\textsuperscript{32}

A gender difference also existed with regards to the importance placed on the economic or financial situation of the would-be partner. Women cared more about this than did men, consistently considering socio-economic status highly important when choosing a partner.\textsuperscript{33} With regard to income, the higher the income, the more pleased women were. Men on the other hand cared that a woman have a decent income, but it was not necessarily a case of the higher the income the better.\textsuperscript{34} Overall, women cared significantly more than men about health and height, their partner's occupation, income, home ownership, education, capability, potential, and cleverness.\textsuperscript{35} Men placed significantly more importance on age and appearance than did women.\textsuperscript{36}

Both the surveys and other text-based research point to several major conclusions. The first general conclusion is that economic considerations continue to be a major factor in mate preference. It is clear that the theme of “economic exchange” to some extent underlies the prevailing view of marriage, as is evident in the fact that men look for women with who had traits appropriate to raising a child and looking after a family, and women look for men with economic potential.\textsuperscript{37} There are also more clear-cut, concrete,
material expressions of the underlying economic concern. The importance of the other person’s profession – a key indicator of earning power and potential – has increased steadily since the late 1940s, and the importance of having a house has increased since the 1980s.\(^{38}\)

Secondly, the research attests to the rise of romance, romantic consumerism, and “feelings” as factors which influence the selection of partners. Xu argues that romance now rivals but has not displaced the importance of economics in mate preference. She believes that, particularly since the 1980s, romance has entered a new “dialectical relationship” with material concerns.\(^{39}\) This observation sits well with the findings of Yan Yunxiang, who states that “notions of romantic love, free choice in spouse selection, conjugal independence, and individual property that emerged during the collective era (1956-1980) have become increasingly important in the domestic sphere since the 1980s.”\(^{40}\) The trend towards emphasising romance and feelings is, according to Xu’s data, particularly pronounced among those who are young, cultured, or have a comparatively high work position.\(^{41}\)

As indicated in the previous chapter, family background has long been a determining factor in Chinese partnerships and in Chinese life in general. Family background was politicised intensely during the first three decades of communist rule, and especially during the Cultural Revolution. Research in the last decade has indicated that family background has declined somewhat in importance, and that the ways in which it is still considered important have changed from an understanding of the potential political ramifications to an appreciation that a good upbringing counts for something. Nowadays, the

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39 Ibid.
41 徐安琪, ‘择偶标准：五十年变迁及其原因分析’), p. 19.
political or class label aspect of one’s partner’s family background still has some, comparatively minor, importance. Being related to people with bad political backgrounds can still limit one’s choices in life. But more important is an increased concern with the overall aspects of one’s partner’s family background – their residential status, education, occupation, cultural levels, overall “quality” (suzhi) and so on.42 Young people in particular emphasise “quality” over other aspects of their partner’s family background.43 Quality is a term which has become widespread over the last ten years, and has come to signify the relative worth of a person, based on a relatively amorphous constellation of factors such as how cultured, educated, developed, and refined they are perceived to be. It has come to be, in the terminology of Pierre Bourdieu, a marker of ‘distinction’. Suzhi is generally only understood to be possessed by the middle and upper echelons, but it is something members of all classes seek to cultivate or, where possible, purchase. Piano lessons, European brand labels, and Western education are all examples of items that are seen to contribute to one’s overall suzhi and can be bought.

The importance of “personality” in mate preference has increased over the generations, and has become a leading concern for young people seeking a match.44 This does not mean there is a blanket emphasis on personality, however. Xu’s research indicates that if the two people already know each other, they are less concerned with political and economic aspects and more with personality. But when initiating contact with a potential partner who is a stranger, then the other two elements retain a higher degree of importance.45

A last general conclusion is that there has been a decline in a number of aspects of what one may call “traditional morals”. First and foremost, evidence

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42 Ibid, p. 25.
44 Ibid, p. 22.
suggests that since around 1980 people have begun to care less about virginity.\textsuperscript{46} This is not to say female virginity in particular is not still seen as a relevant mate-selection criterion, but rather that this has decreased in importance relative to other concerns. Interestingly, another stalwart in the mate selection menu – being “honest and dependable” – has decreased in importance in surveys.\textsuperscript{47} What was once seen as an admirable quality in the socialist economy is seen as a potential liability in the market economy, indicative that one who might be fooled by others, or lacks the ambition to succeed.\textsuperscript{48}

Survey information on the relationship between education and mate preference is in line with the general principle, supported by international research, that as women participate more in paid labour and gain an education they look for more education in their partners.\textsuperscript{49} The research on Japanese marital practices discussed in Chapter 1 supports this point.\textsuperscript{50} It is certainly borne out in the Chinese data, and in fact education has an effect on the expectations of both women and men regarding a would-be partner's education level. Specifically, the importance placed on the education level of a potential partner increases with the respondent's own education level.\textsuperscript{51}

Overall, the criteria whose importance increased with the educational level of the respondent were: the partner’s job; the partner’s income; the presence of

\textsuperscript{46} See for example 煜 李 and 安琪 徐, 婚姻市场中的青年择偶 [The Mate Preference of Young People within the Marriage Market] (上海: 上海社会科学院出版社, 2004), pp. 40-44; 钱铭怡 et al., ‘十五年来中国女性择偶标准的变化’, 北京大学学报(哲学社会科学版), 40/5 (September 2003).
\textsuperscript{47} 徐安琪, ‘择偶标准：五十年变迁及其原因分析’, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{48} Again, this is consistent with the rural-based conclusions of Yan Yunxiang. See Yan Yunxiang, Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy and Family Change in a Chinese Village 1949-1999, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{49} 煜 李 and 安琪 徐, 婚姻市场中的青年择偶; 徐安琪, ‘择偶标准：五十年变迁及其原因分析’.
\textsuperscript{51} 徐安琪, ‘择偶标准：五十年变迁及其原因分析’ p. 19.
shared thinking, views and hobbies between partners; appropriate age; and desirable appearance. The importance of the health of the partner also marginally increased. There were very few criteria whose importance noticeably decreased with education. One was “honest and dependable”. In addition, if one’s own economic background was good, and this generally had some link to education, people did not care as much about the other person’s economic situation. Generally, though, the case appears to be that the more highly educated are more particular and demanding in their mate preference standards than their less-educated counterparts.

The purpose of this first section of the chapter has been to paint a broad picture of what Chinese sources relate are the preferences for potential marriage partners in urban China today. We have examined the popular press, marriage agency findings, and academic surveys and writings. Several features stand out. One is that what is desirable in a mate differs significantly between men and women. Their tacit understandings of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman frame these differing desires. A second and related issue is the seeming centrality of the idea that a man should not marry a woman who is ‘too’ anything – too educated, too smart, or too financially or professionally successful. At the core of this, reported repeatedly by Chinese sources, is the continuing influence of hypergamy in mate preference in China. This issue will be discussed in the following section on high-status women and how they are publicly viewed as mates.

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54 徐安琪，‘择偶标准：五十年变迁及其原因分析’，p. 25.
High-status women as undesirable mates

As noted, women of high status, particularly in terms of education but also in terms of income, are generally portrayed negatively in discussions of what makes an ideal mate. A key reason for this, as we will see, is the prevalence of hypergamy in Chinese society past and present.

Hypergamy pertains to the practice of marrying into a more prestigious social group or caste. In common anthropological usage, hypergamy refers to women marrying into a situation of higher socio-economic status. This practice, as the media, marriage agency and academic sources discussed above suggest, is considered desirable in contemporary China, and continues to be the primary foundation upon which mate preference norms rest.

It is possible to see traces of similar thinking in the popular ideal of women choosing (and being chosen by) men who measure more highly than them on a range of varying gauges – strictly-defined socio-economic status in the initial instance, but also in fields such as height, physical strength, age, and intelligence – which themselves feed into “prestige”, “status”, or “distinction”. 55 This then raises the question – what does this mean for high-status women in contemporary urban China? How are high-earning, highly-educated women living in one of China’s most desirable locations viewed in terms of mate preference?

From the data collected from the popular media, marriage agencies, and academic research sources analysed in section one, there would appear to be serious problems in finding a mate for women who are highly placed socially

55 Pierre Bourdieu is perhaps the most well-known exponent of the idea of ‘distinction’ as it relates to class. See for example, Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).
and/or economically. If a woman is expected to, and indeed desires to, marry a man who is better placed than her, it is logical to believe that the higher she herself is situated, the smaller the pool of available men. And if men generally shy away from women of higher socio-economic status, the pool of men who are actually interested in them would also be comparatively small.

Within the public discourse on marriage and mate preference, the issue of hypergamy as a framing concept is frequently discussed, as are the results of hypergamy in terms of difficulties encountered by singles at either end of the spectrum. A number of fixed phrases exist which speak to the existence of hypergamy and the problems within it, and these are terms familiar to much of the literate Chinese populace. In addition, a range of less formal terms and phrases also circulate around the broad community.

The single most commonly used phrase in the context spelled out above is “甲女丁男” (jia nü ding nan). This can be roughly translated as “Grade A women, Grade D men”. The phrase is based on a commonly accepted idea that all men and women can be divided into four levels. Grade A is the most superior sort of man or woman, with a high degree of education, a high income, high social standing, and other desirable characteristics such as urban registration and the like. Grade D represents the most unfortunate men and women: those with little or no formal education, a poor financial situation, and undesirable rural hukou or similar. In between are Grade B and C men and women, with B being higher than C.

The phrase encapsulates the idea that female hypergamy is the prevailing norm behind mate preference in China today, and that when Grade D women marry Grade C men, Grade C women marry Grade B men, and Grade B women marry Grade A men – as is the expectation – then left over at the end of this pairing process are Grade A women and Grade D men. It being ‘inconceivable’ that members of these two groups would ever get together, it is the sad fate of many of these men and women to remain single indefinitely.

“Grade A women, Grade D men” is a phrase used not only in popular parlance but also by academics conducting research in this field. Responding to its prevalence in contemporary public discourse, Professor Luo Ping of Wuhan University’s Women’s Research Centre has argued that this stems from China’s traditional match-making patterns, and she appeals for change in this pattern. She believes that such a framework is too fixed and inflexible and creates too much pressure for young men and women – both before and during marriage. In an interview I conducted with Dr. Liang, an academic at Beijing University, she made a similar point. She noted the existence of this phrase and the prevalence of what it denoted, and argued that it was in some ways feudal and archaic and people needed to be more ‘modern’ in their choices and attitudes.

Another commonly heard and read phrase regarding high-status women and their disadvantaged situation vis-à-vis marriage is that of “the three highs”. The three “highs” referred to in this phrase vary. In general, they are high income, high position, and high education. However, high “quality” is also at times substituted for either high position or income. When used, the phrase pertains

58 Not her real name.
to women who possess all three of the outlined characteristics. It is consistently used in the same way – to suggest that these women have difficulty in marrying.

Many articles, appearing everywhere from national portal sites to English language dailies, argue that “three high” women are overrepresented as singles.\(^59\) One article states that some of the most problematic professional roles for women are “teachers, lawyers, white-collar employees with foreign-invested companies, medical staff, accountants, translators and statisticians.”\(^60\)

Based on the same sense of the centrality of hypergamous principles, it is said that the higher a woman’s education, the harder it is for her to find a partner;\(^61\) that women are “lonely because of their excellence”;\(^62\) and that “many men cannot accept women with high education [levels]”.\(^63\) Compounding this, old adages such as that “a woman without talent is virtuous” and that the public realm is man’s and the private realm is women’s, heighten the difficulties faced by commercially or educationally successful women.

As part of this research, I conducted my own survey of 172 men and women aged 18 to 75 in various districts across urban Beijing, discussed in more detail in Chapter 1. Each questionnaire was a simple one page document, and began


\(^{60}\) Anonymous, ‘Few Partners for Outstanding Women’.


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with general classificatory questions on gender, age range, marital status, occupation, and education. Part of the questionnaire discussed the phrase ‘the Third Sex’, and the results relating to these questions will be discussed later in this chapter.

Another part of the questionnaire queried whether a woman should marry a man who has an educational level equal to or higher than her own and whether a woman should marry a man who has an income level equal to or higher than her own. My findings indicate that most urban Chinese (69%) believe that a woman should marry a man who has an educational level equal to or higher than her own. Furthermore, 63% of people surveyed believe that a woman should marry a man who has an income equal to or higher than her own. Percentages of men and women who answered these questions in the affirmative were very similar. These figures bear out the results of another survey, conducted in 1994, which showed that 60% of people agreed with the statement “women should avoid surpassing their husbands in social status”.

As discussed in the previous chapter, hypergamy is hardly new in China, with its existence observed from imperial times through the Mao-era and beyond. Some note that it was at least as common as the principle of ‘matching doors’, that is, the idea that one should marry a person of similar standing to themselves. Hypergamy is in fact an aspect of culture that seems to have persisted through the major socio-economic changes since reform. Some markers of socio-economic status might have changed, but the principle itself continues to have a strong hold.

The consequences of this continued type of thinking are articulated in a 1991 survey that shows that 74% of men who were not married were either illiterate or had only attended primary school. The same survey showed that, by contrast, unmarried females were generally well educated.\(^{67}\)

It seems, then, that in contemporary urban China, the mate preference culture is not one which values highly educated and/or high-status women. Despite having what many may consider desirable characteristics like education and wealth, a continuing prevailing rhetoric centring on hypergamy suggests that these women would encounter difficulties attracting a mate.

Introduction to the discourses

Within this broad frame of hypergamy, and in the context of the general mate preference ideals discussed in the first section of this chapter, two related discourses have developed which pertain directly to the women of this study. One discourse surrounds highly educated women and marriage, and another is concerned with high income professional or business women and marriage. Both discourses speak to the idea that these women, as examples of success in two different realms, face a particular set of romantic and marital circumstances in Chinese society. In the next part of this chapter, I will discuss

these two discourses separately, in order to highlight their similarities and differences.

**Discourses about highly educated women and marriage**

As noted in Chapter 1, it was the discourse surrounding highly educated women and their supposed difficulty in marrying which first piqued my interest in this research field. One of the first questions it led me to explore was – where did the key phrase, ‘the Third Sex’, come from?

In understanding the origins and significance of this Chinese term, it is essential to spend some time on the question of translation. The phrase in its original Chinese form is “世界上有三种人：男人，女人，女博士” (shijie shang you san zhong ren: nan ren, nü ren, nü boshi). The opening statement “世界上有三种人” can be multiply interpreted – basically it refers to three categories of humankind which apparently exist in the world. These categories are men, women, and women with PhDs. I have chosen to translate these ‘categories’ as sexes for a number of reasons. The first and most obvious is that this seems to be the standard translation preferred by Chinese people. Secondly, when referring back to the Chinese the context in which the term is employed suggests this translation to be correct. However, at times the broader connotation of ‘a third category of person’ is given play – that is, more than being a third sex apart from women and men, female PhDs are sometimes characterised as positively non-human, alien, not people at all.

The specific saying “there are three sexes in this world: men, women, and women with PhDs” which forms the central part of a narrative on female PhDs appears to have originated from a series of seven dramas about university life
written by Qinghua University students, led by around 60 computer science
students living on campus, and shown as short digital movies on the Qinghua
University intra-university network. The movies were first shown in the latter
part of 2001.

Following this screening, I was told, there was an almost instantaneous
outbreak of discussion on first the Qinghua university internet bulletin board
(BBS), then on university bulletin boards across the city and country, and then
flowing onto general public bulletin boards such as those run by China’s major
internet players Sina and Sohu. Unfortunately the nature of BBSs is such that
backlogs of postings and discussions are only held for a limited period of time,
typically one to three years, and I have been unable to access this material
directly.

I have, however, found newspaper and magazine articles which have made
reference to this outbreak, and which have sought to explain it to the population
at large. *Nanfang Zhoumo* (Southern Weekend), a popular weekend magazine
generally read by relatively educated urbanites, ran an article in early 2002
describing these short digital movies as “the best textbook for understanding
university life” today. It gave an outline of 13 key terms used in the series. The
fifth listed was:

“The third sex: a joke, a mocking reference, used in Qinghua campus language,
meaning that humankind is divided into three kinds: Men, Women, and Women
PhDs. The third sex refers to Women PhDs” (my translation). 68

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68 Anonymous, “清華酒井文化：網絡時代的校園與戲劇”, *南方周末* (updated 23 April 2002),
appeared in *Nanfang Zhoumo* [Southern Weekend], 949 (18 April 2002).
By way of deeper historico-linguistic background, the twenty-first century may have seen the first incarnation of ‘the Third Sex’ as meaning specifically women with PhDs, but intriguingly the turn of phrase has had at least two prior incarnations in the Chinese language. Firstly, the same Chinese term *di san zhong ren* was also used in 1930s and 1940s China, but at this time was defined more along the lines of ‘types of person’ as opposed to ‘sexes’. In this context, *di san zhong ren* were those writers who were non-aligned, that is, aligned neither to the Communist nor Nationalist camps, and who called for the ending of political interference in literature.\(^{69}\) Secondly, and in circumstances far more consonant with the current incarnation, ‘the Third Sex’ was also used to describe the very small proportion of Chinese women who chose, during the 1920s and 1930s, to eschew the flawed institution of marriage altogether and live a single life. As outlined in chapter one, at this time a single life meant a celibate life in both the sense of being unmarried and of not being sexually active, since sex outside of marriage was not socially acceptable for a proper woman.\(^{70}\) Such women, who put career and learning ahead of marriage and family, were known as ‘the Third Sex’. Women, being defined by marriage, lay in somewhat unknown and unclassifiable terrain if they consciously refrained from it.\(^{71}\) The similarity between this early twentieth-century incarnation and today’s is quite striking, and suggests that at some stage the term may have been borrowed from this earlier usage and redefined for the present era.

The phrase ‘the Third Sex’ and the ideas which it puts forward form part of a discourse on highly educated women and marriage, which in turn forms part of a broader discourse on high-status women and marriage. Both the broader discourse and that relating specifically to highly educated women suggest that


\(^{70}\) Laura Clarke, ‘An Unnatural State: Views on Celibacy in Funü Zazhi’ [unpublished B.A. thesis], (Trinity Hall, University of Cambridge, 1988). Again my thanks to Harriet Evans for providing me with a copy of this very interesting thesis.

\(^{71}\) Ibid, pp. 40-42.
their marriage chances are slim – owing in part to society and in part to these women themselves. The women are characterised as bad choices as wives, as unattractive and unsuitable. They are also depicted as being extremely picky and unwilling to settle for a man who isn’t ‘perfect’.

A review of both formal and informal media indicates that there is widespread public commentary on this group and the romantic problems they are perceived to face. Although not surfacing necessarily daily, some reference or other along the lines mentioned above is made on a regular basis in the major newspapers and news websites such as the People’s Daily, Beijing Youth Daily, China Daily, Sina News, Sohu News, and Xinhua News Net, with references especially common on internet bulletin boards and discussion pages. At times commentary flares up and multiple stories are carried across a number of major media outlets, at other times individual unrelated snippets and stories appear. Simple periodic searches using terms such as ‘the Third Sex’ and ‘female PhD’ through Chinese internet search engines regularly bring results in the tens of thousands. Of course, not all are relevant, but many are. Cross-referencing between the terms leads to more accurate results, still numbering in the hundreds on each separate search engine, and ranging from references in major news media to hugely popular discussion pages and internet bulletin boards.

The saying is certainly well known in Beijing. In my survey of 172 men and women mentioned above, respondents were then asked whether or not they had heard of ‘the Third Sex’, and if yes were asked to select which of the definitions I proposed was the correct one. The options were females with PhDs, males with PhDs, homosexuals, cross-dressers, those who have had sex changes, and aliens. Space was given for respondents to provide an alternative definition if they thought it appropriate. The questionnaire asked
respondents to nominate where they had heard this saying (multiple responses were permitted), and when they first heard the saying. Sixty-one percent of those surveyed indicated that they knew the phrase, and all but a handful of these considered it to mean females with PhDs.

In the process of conducting searches in the media for material on the ‘Third Sex’ and female PhDs, I uncovered a number of other terms and phrases also invoked to describe both the female PhDs and the situation they were believed to be in with regard to dating and marriage. The ‘Third Sex’ reference is now well entrenched. Joining the fold as the next major catch-cry was the description of female PhDs as Miejue Shi’Tai (灭绝师太). As a Xinhua English News Service article on the plight of highly educated women in China explains:

Another joke quite popular among young Chinese compares educated women to the women characters in well-known writer Jin Yong’s [金庸)] famous kungfu novels.

In the joke, women with Bachelor's degrees are called Huang Rong (depicted in the original novel as clever and beautiful), but [the] women’s image worsens as their educational attainment increases.

When it reaches the level of a PhD, women are compared to Miejueshitai (old nuns who have acquired good kungfu skills but become cruel, fierce and ugly).\(^72\)

The full statement comparing women of differing education levels with characters in Jin Yong’s novels is “专科生是赵敏，本科生是黄蓉，研究生是李莫愁，博士生是灭绝师太，博士后是东方不败”. This comparison caught the

imagination of newspaper readers and internet users around November 2004. It first formed the content of an article published in *China Youth Daily* (*Qingnian Bao*) in online and print forms, and the article thereafter was carried in various edited forms across many websites. This term in no way took over from ‘the Third Sex’; it merely served to compound the image of the female PhD as strange, unfeminine, and unlucky or unwilling in love.

Another term commonly used in discussing female PhDs is “UFO”. This is a reappropriation of the English term Unidentified Flying Object to represent three other English words connected with beliefs about the nature of these women – Ugly, Fat and Old. In some cases the words used are ugly, *foolish*, and old.

These terms can be also be combined under the banner of this discourse with the popular phrases discussed in direct relation to hypergamy: phrases like the ‘three highs’ – of which education is one; and “甲女丁男” (*jia nü ding nan*), in which education also is a central element.

In the media coverage of female PhDs, a range of these sayings is presented, and readers quickly get the impression that women with PhDs are generally seen as unattractive, badly dressed, bespectacled, old, unfeminine, incredibly picky, strange, having no understanding of society, no awareness of their sexuality, not knowing how to have fun, potentially unable to gain employment commensurate with their high educational qualifications, and not likely to have any chance of finding a husband – which is just as well since they can neither cook nor clean and would make terrible wives and mothers. Many articles use these sayings in a way that clearly assumes the audience is already familiar with them,\(^73\) whilst others spell out their meanings more fully.

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One brief taste of the nature of the discourse is provided by one observation, made by a woman who is herself doing her PhD, that men viewed her and her female colleagues as:

Ugly, and even if you wouldn’t say very ugly, also wears thick black spectacles, unsuitably dresses like an old peasant bumpkin; everything that comes out of her mouth has to do with academic questions, [exuding] an unbearable pedantic air…  

Another woman, contemplating whether or not to continue on to do her PhD, states she is afraid of the idea that a woman with a PhD is seen as “dried up, boring, even no longer a woman at all.”

A female PhD student by the name of Xing Lili was quoted in the *Beijing Review* as saying “we concentrate on study at the best time for finding a boyfriend. The huge pressure in finding employment has forced us to struggle for high education. After completing the study, we find that we have become ‘withered flowers’”. The article went on to say that “because they are older than most single women, female PhDs have to lower their standards when seeking a spouse and often feel like ‘seasonal goods cut to half price’.” Xing stated that “we cannot find a suitable man. The reason is that many men are scared by the doctorate title. They do not see us as normal women.”

Hu and Lin discuss the dual worries of female PhDs: “During the day she frets about her thesis, during the night she frets about [her prospects of] getting married”. The authors claim that “the realistic predicament is: once a woman

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75 Anonymous, ‘3rd Type of People Besides Men, Women?’.

has done her Masters or PhD, men as primal animals don’t see these women as the opposite sex, but instead are forced by their educational qualifications to run away in fear.” This is, according to the authors, in part due to a posited inverse relationship between a woman’s education or success levels and her ‘womanhood’ or ‘femininity’, as judged by men.

In a lengthy article entitled “高学历女性婚恋调查” [An Investigation into the Love and Marriage of Highly Educated Women], readers are told that in marriage agencies, there are more highly educated women as clients than there are similarly educated men. Men “shrink back at the sight” of these women, and thus the women do not have a good success rate in finding a match. The article argues that is especially the case when the educated women are over 30 years of age. They are both too educated and too old – a double curse.

The article “The Third Type of People” also uses interviews with marriage agency staff members to support the idea that it is difficult for highly educated women to find a partner. It contains a personalised story about the neighbour of a friend of the author, a woman who has a PhD: “the woman is not ugly at all, but she still hasn't been able to find a husband, even though she is already in her 30s. Many men don’t even want to see her photo when they hear about her awesome degree, let alone consider dating her.”

The concern of families over a young woman being doomed to spinsterhood is a common theme in articles. “女博士择偶状况调查” [An Investigation into the Circumstances of Female PhDs’ Selection of Partners], for example, tells the story of the younger sister of a 32-year-old female PhD student who went to a

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77 Anonymous, ‘高学历女性婚恋调查: 世俗观念多女博士不抢手’. 
marriage agency on her behalf, as all of the family was quite concerned that she was not yet married.\textsuperscript{78}

A number of pieces contain interviews with men, asking them their views on the desirability of women with PhDs as wives. Men were quoted as saying “when looking for a wife, you shouldn’t choose one of those strong ones,” and that a wife’s education should not be higher than her husband’s, otherwise the husband would have no status in his own home, and no face outside.\textsuperscript{79} One of the most common apprehensions voiced by men was that the woman would not pay sufficient attention to her natural role as a wife and mother. For example, one Nanjing businessman was quoted as saying that most highly educated women were too ambitious, and wouldn’t put much energy into the family. He said that as the man has been working hard all day, he wants to come home and have his wife look after him – to cook, clean and so on.\textsuperscript{80} A number of writers observed that men felt threatened by these women and their success.

Some texts differentiate between different kinds of female PhDs, particularly with respect to the discipline in which they have studied. There is some debate on which disciplines are most toxic for a woman’s chances in love. In many cases, women who did their PhDs in what were considered more ‘masculine’ fields such as engineering, maths, and computer science were seen as at higher risk of becoming like ‘Miejue Shi’Tai’ than their counterparts in the more ‘feminine’ disciplines of the arts and humanities.\textsuperscript{81} This in some respects seems counterintuitive, given that a woman in a non-traditionally female field is likely to have more contact with men and therefore a ready-made pool of potential

\textsuperscript{78} 耿新 ‘女博士择偶状况调查 因为优秀所以孤单’.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{80} Anonymous, ‘高学历女性婚恋调查：世俗观念多女博士不抢手’.
partners. However, the argument put forward is that these women are even more likely to experience the loss of the sexualised, attractive, feminine traits desirable in a wife or girlfriend. Other articles put forward a contrary view, claiming that women doing PhDs in the arts and humanities had the highest chance of ending up as old maids, due to their limited social circle and limited contact with the opposite sex.\(^{82}\)

A number of writers place the blame squarely on the women themselves. One element of the ‘problem’ is seen to be that, as sociologist Ma Qianfeng put it, “as people can only have one major focus at any period of time, concentrating on academic research will naturally reduce the demand for love… The emotional vacuum will then push them back to fill their psychological needs by devoting more time to study, thus forming a vicious circle.”\(^{83}\) Others simply argue that these women are very busy with studies and thus have less time to socialise than is ideal.\(^{84}\) Another element related to the women themselves is that they are too picky, or that they set their sights too high.\(^{85}\) One article, whose title translates as “How High Education Can Become a Stumbling Block to Marriage for Women” takes this tack, noting that more and more women have PhDs these days, so they are not that special, yet they continue to demand a great deal from any potential mate.\(^{86}\) A third dimension of the belief that highly educated women are themselves to blame for their dating woes relates to the disposition of these women and how it inhibits the


commencement and follow-through of romantic encounters. Articles make claims such as that “their usually steady, rational disposition means that they appear introverted and may be passive when facing love”. A popular observation is that these women were often strong in reason but a little blind to emotion.

There are somewhat fewer media texts that posit that the discourse is false, that these women do not face difficulties in getting married due to their education levels and that the women are not unpleasant, unmarketable individuals. As part of an attempt to give a balanced portrayal of the romantic lives of highly educated women, “An Investigation Into The Love and Marriage of Highly Educated Women” not only talks about the difficulties marriage agency staff members witness in these women’s search for a partner, but also paints a picture of a number of highly educated women who are untouched by these sayings. The article argues that when on university campuses it is a very different picture to that of the dried-up old maid – these female postgraduates are young, outstanding, and busy enjoying their lives, without giving the slightest thought to sayings like ‘the Third Sex’. The article gives many examples of female PhDs who have boyfriends or husbands. A number of other articles include snippets of interviews with women with PhDs, who insist they are not as the media portrays.

In some media articles, women who themselves have PhDs speak of the advantages that this holds. One woman claims that she had a lot of free time. During the day time she does her work and attends class, but at night time she and her husband and child can watch television or go out for a walk, and on

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87 Ibid.
89 Anonymous, ‘高学历女性婚恋调查：世俗观念多女博士不抢手’.

A handful of women and men who knew or had known female PhDs state that they do not agree with the public images of them – although somewhat fewer than those who confirm the public image. One young woman states on her blog that she used to believe in all those sayings about female PhDs but then she met one (a physics teacher of hers), who was funny, elegant, feminine, had a daughter, and whom she hoped to emulate.\footnote{Anonymous, ‘May 20: 女博士’, [Blog entry], http://tomato982315.spaces.live.com/blog/, accessed 22 March 2007.} Some researchers support the view that women with PhDs are enviable creatures: in an article on the topic Dr. Zhang of Beijing University states that the impact on one’s personality of completing a PhD can only be positive, not negative, because further education increases people’s confidence.\footnote{Anonymous, ‘女博士:我们拒绝被“妖魔化”’.}

Men who are married to female PhDs provide a particularly interesting perspective. Their contributions to the media coverage typically involve explaining that their wives are just like any other men’s wives. One husband explains that while his wife was doing her PhD he sometimes had a little more work to do around the house, but he has no real complaints – he knows that her having a PhD will be good for her career and therefore the family, and he also thinks that due to her education level they have better “spiritual exchange” than many husbands and wives.\footnote{Anonymous, ‘我的另一半是女博士’, 大众日报 (updated 14 June 2005) http://life.beelink.com.cn/20050614/1865169.shtml, accessed 17 March 2005.} Another husband of a female PhD is quoted as saying that his wife is just “a lovely girl, like any other girl.”\footnote{舟子, “妖魔化”女博士—清华的悲哀 (updated 25 January 2005) http://www.women.org.cn/allnews/04/151.html, accessed 1 March 2005.}
Some other articles argue that highly educated women have two sides: a side that is dedicated to study and academic achievement, and a side that is dedicated to being a good woman. The latter involves being a good wife and mother. One article here contains case studies of different female PhDs who had children, and it seeks to illustrate what these women teach their children about life, for example diligence, perseverance, and egalitarianism. The potential positives for those married to women with PhDs included benefits to future children, in that these children would be clever and that they would be able to walk in public with their heads held high. An additional benefit to the family would be that in tough times, if both the husband and the wife had PhDs, there would be two strong people who could be relied on.

As well as putting their hands up to support or oppose the truth of this discourse, some authors also seek to provide explanations for why the sayings about women with PhDs have arisen. The major sources are identified as Chinese feudal traditions and their social and cultural legacies; hypergamy; male chauvinism; the lack of real sociological research and education in China broadly; the specialised and restricted nature of China’s education system; women themselves for allegedly being too focussed on their studies and ignoring other important aspects of their lives; the passivity and over-rationality of these women; and the small social circle in which they locate themselves.

Chinese “tradition” is occasionally condemned for gender-based discrimination against women, which contributes to the presence of this discourse. One sociologist is quoted as saying that in Chinese tradition women have not been

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98 Anonymous, ‘为什么?女博士为何难家人?’.
The idea that women with high educations should hide them was seen to be a manifestation of this. A scholar at a college that trains officials of the Women’s Federation, incensed by the existence of the types of sayings that make up this discourse, states that these are clear examples of gender inequality and discrimination. She argues that female PhDs’ “rationality, determination, obstinacy and decisiveness, all advantages in men, become weak points in women, especially when talking about marriage.”

One author notes that they have traced the beginnings of the internet presence of these kinds of sayings to men’s websites, and claims that if one reads between the lines, it is possible to see that at the root of the sayings is a lack of self-confidence on the part of men, and a fundamental lack of respect for women. An occasional voice also raises the point that as society develops and greater gender equality emerges, men feel threatened by the rapid rise of women.

Another approach focuses on the “traditional image” of what a woman should ideally be like. For example, although research shows that some portions of the Chinese female population were quite highly educated during imperial times, education was generally conceived of historically as the domain of men. That educated women were once counted among the “stinking nine” categories of persons, that is, the ‘untouchables’ of society, was noted in one article. The Chinese idiom “a woman without talent is virtuous” and the ideas behind it are...

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pointed to in this context. One article is quite strong in its language on this, claiming that “in the final analysis, the view from feudal society that ‘a woman without talent is virtuous’ is like a malignant tumour eating away at contemporary society.” In another article, sociologist Yu Bangzhao is quoted as saying that this is not specifically a Chinese problem but one of Asian culture more broadly, which prescribes that a man should be strong and he should be with a weak woman. Despite the general rhetoric about equality of the sexes, Yu notes, this kind of thinking is in people’s blood. The “strong male, weak female” saying and the paradigm which it captures is put forward as a major source of blame for the situation. In some cases both men and women are blamed for perpetuating this traditional idea. In other cases, men are seen as the gender most deserving of blame.

A number of the highly educated women interviewed in articles are adamant that the idea that a man should marry a woman “inferior” to himself is largely to blame for the difficulties they have romantically. It is presumed that if men shunned this idea, the marital prospects of highly educated women would markedly improve. Looking elsewhere for blame, one commentator laments the

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109 See for example 秀芳 ‘高学历何以成为女性婚嫁绊脚石’.

110 One article that is representative of this view is Anonymous, ‘Ivory Tower Lonely for Women’.
unbalanced and unwise emphasis on scientific and technological progress at
the expense of a greater understanding of society. Professor Wu Xiaoming of
the Sichuan branch of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences argues that if
more money was spent on social science research rather than just the sciences,
this kind of topic could be investigated more deeply and the problem eased or
eradicated.\textsuperscript{111} The highly specialised nature of the Chinese education system,
which relies on attention to narrow technical detail and in many cases on rote-
learning, is also nominated as contributing to highly educated women’s difficulty
in getting married. As one author expresses it, this means women who reach
the highest levels of education often do so at the expense of learning anything
about real life.\textsuperscript{112}

A portion of the media coverage discusses the influence of the discourse on
highly educated women. A number of writers observe that it makes women
reticent to reveal their true level of educational attainment to prospective
romantic partners.\textsuperscript{113} One famous story is told in many an article: A woman had
lied at a marriage agency about her educational attainment, and only revealed
it to the man she met through this service after he had proposed. He
subsequently broke off the engagement and the relationship ended.\textsuperscript{114}

Anecdotes also are told of women who were thinking of doing their PhDs but
decided not to. There are many websites and newspapers that carried the story
that in one of Nanjing’s top universities, nine out of ten of the female Masters
students in a certain department did not go on to do their PhDs despite being
eligible to do so, specifically because they did not want to face the difficulties in

\textsuperscript{111} 何娇娇 ‘高校怪论：女研究生属第三种性别’, (updated 18 April 2004)
\textsuperscript{112} 何娇娇 ‘高校怪论：女研究生属第三种性别’, (updated 18 April 2004)
\textsuperscript{113} Anonymous, ‘中国的女博士什么时候成了第三种人’.
\textsuperscript{114} This story is told in many an article, including 李, 江平 ‘女博士拿本科文凭征婚 男友得知真相提出分手’,
getting married that they thought having a PhD would engender.\textsuperscript{115} Other articles tell the stories of individual women who had been seriously considering going on to do their PhDs, but who had been bullied or dissuaded into giving up on the idea by concerned relatives and friends.\textsuperscript{116} Some women write that they had been at the receiving end of these kinds of warnings but had continued on with their studies despite them.\textsuperscript{117}

**Discourses about high-income women and marriage**

The terms employed in the discourse on high-income women have a less specific story of origin and development than those relating to highly educated women, but like that discourse they generally posit that a woman who has achieved a measure of success – this time economic – is likely to have difficulties in her private life. As is the case with highly educated women, it is often indicated that these women are to blame for their own sorry romantic lot.

I followed a similar methodology to that used for the highly educated group. Scanning media sources and speaking informally with local Chinese men and women, I made a note of some terms commonly used to describe women with good jobs and good incomes. Terms such as superwoman (*nü qiangren*), professional/career woman (*zhiye nüxing*), and white-collar woman (*bailing nüxing*) then formed my initial search terms and led to a broader understanding.

\textsuperscript{115} See for example Hu Jiujiu and Lin Xiang, '高知女性面临婚姻难题 学位证不敌结婚证'.
\textsuperscript{117} Anonymous, '高学历女性婚恋调查:世俗观念多女博士不抢手' contains an example of this, as does Tang, 'Marriage Blues'.
of what was said about high-income women, and in particular what was said about them in relation to their romantic circumstances and marital prospects.

The romantic problems this group of women were perceived to face were regularly discussed in both the informal and formal media, on a similar range of popular sites as was the case with the commentary on highly educated women’s love lives. It is claimed that high-income Chinese women faced a degree of difficulty in their romantic endeavours due both to their income and to the lives that they presumably led in order to attain it. Unlike the discourse on women with high-level research degrees, the discourse on high-earning women does not rest neatly around just one or two key labels such as ‘the Third Sex’ and ‘Miejue Shi’tai’ (recall the cruel, unattractive, martial artist nun). By contrast, this second discourse is more diffuse and amorphous, and, either as a cause or a consequence of this, appears to have arguably weaker rhetorical power than the first. Nonetheless, as is the case with terms that constituted the discourse around highly educated women and marriage, these group-specific terms were also combined with the popular phrases discussed earlier in direct relation to hypergamy, adding power and cohesiveness to the discourse.

High-income, professional women in China are depicted in the press as being disproportionately single. One article, for example, claims that a large and increasing number of white-collar women are single in China’s modernising urban centres. It states “a recent social investigation has demonstrated that the two cities Beijing and Shanghai each have 500,000 white-collar females

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who are not to be able to find a partner” and puts forward a view on why this is the case.\textsuperscript{120}

The article “Urban Beauties a Breed Apart”, which appeared in the English language \textit{Beijing Review}, features an interview with one of China’s most well-known researchers of the romantic lives and marital conditions of contemporary Chinese. Professor Li Xiaojiang stated that there is a relatively new group called ‘urban beauties’ which encompasses other relatively new groups like white-collar women and middle-class women. She stated that many are single; that these women are independent and focus on the quality of their lives; and that these women lead social trends in many ways but can also be the targets of jealousy.\textsuperscript{121} An example of this central point in the discourse from a far less professional perspective is provided by an article which offers examples of single women in the four major metropolises of Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangdong.\textsuperscript{122} These women are likened to their cities in personality and characteristics. Befitting all four cities, these single women are consistently depicted as rather youthful, professional, and of high income.

Overall, and in contrast to the perspective brought to bear on the perceived situations of single highly educated women, it is often said that high-income women \textit{want} to be single, that this is a conscious choice. According to various sources in the formal and informal media, some choose to be single because they want maximum freedom, some because they have learned that ‘men are trouble’, and some because they want to focus on their career. Apparently, many of these women feel that their own relatively high income means that they do not need a man to support them or even to supplement their income.

One article presents some of the reasons behind women’s choices to remain

\textsuperscript{120}Ibid.
single, in the form of the stories of three single Chinese women.\textsuperscript{123} There are, however, many other explorations of this realm.\textsuperscript{124}

Interestingly, one article conveys the findings of a recent report that showed that over 50\% of Beijing women who earned between 5,000 and 15,000 RMB per month – a figure which puts them squarely in the high-income bracket at the time – remained single.\textsuperscript{125} The survey showed that there are five reasons for this: “firstly, 48.3 percent of them are economically independent and unnecessary to depend on men [sic]; secondly, 6.5 percent are too busy with their work; thirdly, 12.2 percent are too outstanding to find superior male partners; fourthly, 23.4 percent distrust the existence of true feelings; and 9.6 percent for other reasons.”\textsuperscript{126} Of note is that although a significant proportion of these women believe that they are single due to a lack of suitably superior men as options, the most popular reason put forward in the survey was actually that marriage was economically unnecessary.

The subjective choice element is highlighted in comparisons with other groups of Chinese singles. One article on singles and marriage in Beijing and Shanghai involves an interview with a sociology professor from Nanjing University, who observes that the present marriage market incorporates two clear “single” phenomena: there are the 28- to 45-year-old men from the countryside who are unmarried against their will, and urban women, who are the opposite – that is, for whom being single is their subjective choice.”\textsuperscript{127} In a subsequent discussion, the professor makes it clear that the urban women to


\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{127} Anonymous, ‘京沪白领不为婚姻而婚姻’.
whom he refers have excellent economic standing, and are usually white-collar workers and other highly paid professionals.

Readers are frequently told that the numbers of singles in China are increasing, and that this is especially the case among the growing Chinese middle class. One article reports that “In Beijing alone, according to the most recent study, the number of singletons between 30 and 50 reached half a million in 2002, five times the figure for 1990.” It also states that approximately 60% of these singles are female, and that “Shanghai and other metropolises report similar trends.” Another article states that in Guangdong province there are over 1.5 million single white-collar workers, including many between 25 and 35. The gender breakdown of these singles was not given. The article makes the point that one should not see these people as “old singles”, as society has changed. The expectations on young people and the investment of time and effort needed to succeed mean that young white-collar workers have a different focus to that of earlier generations and their rural cousins.

While much of the commentary on high-income women and their romantic position is fairly positive in their depiction of these women, many articles focus on more negative aspects of their presumed singledom. Stories are told of women who find that, when they need someone to help them with physical tasks like moving house, there is no-one around but their other single female friends. Other articles use the diaries or blog entries of single high-income

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129 Ibid.
Although much of the commentary focuses on the possibility that these women choose to be single, another significant proportion is based on the belief that these women do want to get married, but are not having any success meeting and developing a relationship with the right man. There are two main reasons put forward for their perceived lack of success in the matchmaking game: that this is the fault of the women for being too picky; and that this is not the fault of the women as such – men just are not willing to choose them. Behind both reasons the influence of hypergamy, where a woman marries a man of superior social and economic status to herself, is again shown to be a double-edged sword.\textsuperscript{136}

According to one article, 65% of the women who placed partner-seeking advertisements in the national magazine \textit{Women of China} in the year 2000 expected potential partners to be successful in their career. This is compared with 42% in 1985. Most notably, according to Professor Qian in a \textit{China Daily} article, "it is natural for women to prefer men with greater capacity and higher social status… From the evolutionary point of view, men with better social and economic conditions are more likely to ensure the well-being of their offspring."\textsuperscript{137} Another article on requirements in a mate includes the comments of a Miss Mu, whose views are depicted as representative of many urban women. "If I make 10,000 RMB and he makes 8,000, that's ok, but if I make 10,000 and he makes 5,000, that's not ok. Preferably he should own a home, rather than us having to save up to buy one," said Mu.\textsuperscript{138}


One high-income woman posted an article of her own online, seeking to increase others’ understanding of the perspectives of single women like herself and many of her friends. The substance of her short article demonstrated that indeed some high-status women were extremely inflexible in the standards that they expected a partner to fill. ‘Anthea’ wrote “they say you can forget everything else when two people are in love, but could you really [as a woman] marry a person who has a lower educational status than you, whose work ability is less than yours, and who earns less money than you? There are few who can ignore practicalities like this in marriage.”

Approaching the issue slightly differently, a handful of articles discuss how weighing up quality of life has become an important factor for women, and contributes to them being very selective in who they will consider as a mate. There is no need for them to compromise – they are economically independent and successful and therefore should only consider men who will add to this.

Academic research has at times fed into this discourse and provided ‘evidence’ which has provided legitimacy to such hypergamous desires. According to a survey conducted in 2002 by the Marriage and Family Society of China in cooperation with the Psychology Faculty of Beijing Normal University, “couples with an earnings ratio of two to one between a husband and wife enjoyed close communications more often, a more varied home life and a better sex life than those who earned the same amount.” This story was carried widely in the popular media, and the researchers were quoted as saying that “the earnings

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The central element of hypergamy is also evident in the view that men will not choose high-income, professional women. The main argument is that men feel threatened by such obviously successful women, and would prefer to marry someone to whom they could compare themselves favourably. Articles make claims to the effect that the new-found success of city women today often intimidates men. One quotes a 26-year-old woman who says "I dated a man for several months, but since the weekend when I asked him to help me pick out a car, he never called again". Another explores the experience of Ms Chen and argues that it is not rare for outstanding middle-aged women like her to have difficulty in finding a romantic partner.

Another article notes that “many... successful women have to tell lies. Those who have houses can’t tell [the] truth, and those who have cars have to say they go to work by bike. What’s more, women managers and women officials have to tell men they’re clerks, and women entrepreneurs have to be da gong mei [female migrant workers, who often work in service industries]. Women who are successful in their career need to disguise their true condition in front of love and marriage.”

Another reason for which men are said not to choose high-status women is that in the process of becoming so successful in traditionally male domains, these women have lost a degree of their femininity and therefore sexual appeal. Degrees of acceptance of this are varied on the part of men. One of the more

142 Ibid.
‘generous’ points of view put forward was this one: “I can admire her, but I cannot fall in love with her.”

In addition to commentary that attributes blame to either men or women, at times the fault is said to lie with both. This is especially the case for many younger singles who belong to the first generation to be born under the one-child policy. This generation is frequently referred to in the media and in everyday parlance as the post-1980 generation. Urban members of this demographic have often been provided with many opportunities during their childhood and young adulthood and now that they are in their 20s many are well-educated and work in well-paid professional positions. When it comes to their personal lives, however, these young men and women are portrayed as superficial, rash, self-centred, and overly demanding in their criteria for an ideal potential partner.

As well as these social or generational factors seen to contribute the presumed singledom of high-income women, the practical realities of everyday existence are also recognised as playing a role. The two commonly identified practical restraints on these women being in relationships are that these women are busy and that they have a small social circle. By way of example, a joint 
Beijing Morning Post and sina.com survey found that only 5% of respondents said they preferred single life to married life; 66.47% said they remained single.
only because they had not found their so-called Mr. Right. And in a survey of the marriage situation of white-collar workers conducted by website love21cn.com, 50.2% attributed their current mostly single status to “limited opportunities to meet people outside work”.

The occasional media piece seeks to offer a contrary view. In these, men and women comment that these women are actually quite desirable, and also that there is proof of this in the successful marriages of many. Through letters to the editor or as respondents to surveys and interviews, some Chinese men put forward their view that marrying a rich woman is actually a good idea. The argument is usually that such a woman will be able to take some of the struggle out of life, by decreasing pressure on one to succeed economically. In a country where material desires are increasing and the cost of housing is rapidly rising, the presence of such thinking is unsurprising. Other men take a less wholly financially-oriented position when appraising the value of marrying a high-income woman. Some profess that these women are extremely capable and that they would bring that to family life also. In this vein, one man writes that from his perspective single successful women have many options and would be good partners – they are mature, wealthy, and experienced.

Discourses and the media – a discussion

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150 Ibid.
That these popular discourses exist does not *a priori* mean that high-status women really do find less romantic success than their lower status sisters. But the existence of such discourses is interesting not simply as a purported reflection of fact, but because of the socio-political roles these discourses play. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Stanley Cohen’s concept of ‘moral panic’ provides an interesting angle from which to examine the question of why it is that negative portrayals of certain groups appear in the media. In his view, the media turns particular groups into folk devils or scapegoats, “in order to highlight and amplify anxieties about deviant behaviour in a society as a whole. This leads to the creation of what he calls a moral panic.” This phenomenon typically occurs during periods of rapid social change or under other conditions of social instability. The appearance of discourses about the ‘deviant’ behaviour of particular subgroups of the population is often an attempt to impose a sort of moral order in such circumstances.

It is not difficult to see how the precondition of a high degree of social change is met in contemporary China. The economic reform and opening up that began in the late 1970s and that has made considerable headway in urban areas in particular has had social consequences that are both considerable and oftentimes unintended. The effects of such upheaval in terms of encouraging the identification of scapegoats or folk devils has previously been discussed by Borge Bakken. Bakken applied Cohen’s concept of moral panics to the Chinese reaction against juvenile crime and juvenile transgression. Sun Wanning has applied a similar framework to her studies of the domestic maid in urban China. She believes that the media have come to assume “a new moral regulatory role... in the social life of post-socialist China. The media not only give generous space to expressing the moral uncertainties of the urban residents in the rapidly changing social formations, it is also crucial in setting up new moral
parameters.” Sun employs language strikingly similar to that of Cohen, focussing on the depiction of domestic maids as at times morally transgressive. Sun states that these public expressions of anxiety, fear, and desire relate fundamentally to the need to draw and maintain boundaries. They are not gratuitous but rather are crucial to the formation of collective identities. In the case of the figure of the domestic maid, the rhetoric around her helps to form a particular gendered urban identity, “marked with… an aspiration for a new middle-class sensibility.”

Like the domestic maid, who by her insertion into the landscape of private homes and private lives in contemporary urban China changes that landscape, these highly educated women and high-income women, through their perceived inability or unwillingness to conform with more traditional, patriarchal gender roles, are seen to have a disruptive effect on conventional social patterns. While not necessarily leading to ‘panic’, the presence of such discourses clearly demonstrates that a degree of what might be called ‘social angst’ exists. Chinese women as a group have, as was noted in the previous chapter, commonly been credited with holding the moral fate of the nation in their hands and embodying national virtue. Where there has been national shame, demise, or political or social collapse, attention has often been drawn to the situation and behaviour of women. The New Woman or Modern Girl of the Republican era introduced in the previous chapter is a perfect example of this. This figure was initially depicted as a favourable feature of China’s development – educated, enlightened, and patriotic – but soon came to represent the loose morals and evils of a commercialised, open, vulnerable China. Modern, commercialised, and international, this figure’s morals, attire, sexual behaviour, and occupation came under attack.

For a significant body of women to be as educated and high-earning as are the women of my group is something which has only occurred over the past decade or two. As discussed in the previous chapter, the numbers of women graduating from university began to rise rapidly in the 1990s, with the numbers of women attaining postgraduate qualifications rising on the back of this. No similar figures for women’s income levels across time are available, however the rise of the middle class in China is noted to be a phenomenon beginning in the mid to late 1990s. The earliest deployment of the term ‘the Third Sex’ to call into question the marriageability of women with PhDs appears to have been in the late 1990s. This timing is consistent with the growth of this group to the point where it became publicly visible, and, apparently, a group which aroused public interest, curiosity, and concern about who these women were and what their existence meant for society.

In terms of the role of the press in propagating discourses around particular groups, at least two motives appear possible. First, there is the desire to make a profit by carrying stories which capture the interest and in some cases play on the insecurities of their clientele. Second, and more contentiously, it is possible that media commentary around high-status women and marriage is part of a critique of the nature and rate of social change in contemporary China. As Michael Keane puts it, given the risks associated with public expressions of dissent there is a tendency within Chinese media outlets to problematise the small while supporting the big. That is, the personal lives of high-status urban women appears to be a safe, ‘filler’ type topic in this politicised media space, but perhaps such coverage can also be read against the grain, as a subtle and possibly unconscious criticism of the Chinese government’s stewardship of the nation. If women are out of place, is the government really on top of things? Coverage in the informal media, including on personal websites, blogs, BBSs and the like, could perhaps be even stronger examples of expressions of
popular but generalised discontent given that citizens are more directly engaged in the production of this media content.

All this said, why does there appear to be more public and media discussion of the personal lives of highly educated women than high-income women? Some scholars might view the differing focuses of the discourses as being related to a perception within the government that there is more social and political need to keep highly educated women ‘in their place’ than there is for high-income women. This argument is linked to the view that the most dangerous challenges to both present and past Chinese governments have come from highly educated groups. However, given that the sayings on highly educated women and marriage circulate largely in the popular, informal media, there is little evidence to suggest that the negative portrayal of highly educated women is reflective of any state-led campaign to enforce order and control over these women.

A more relevant factor is the ‘curiosity’ factor. Modern, high-income women are often viewed as closely linked to China’s greater entry into the global marketplace. They are depicted in the media as working in foreign companies alongside foreign men and women, reading international fashion and lifestyle magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, and are held up against images of women received through popular movies and TV series imported from the West. Their lifestyles are characterised as approximating a ‘known’ model of femininity or womanhood: that of the fashionable, sexually aware Western working woman. But a similar media frame does not exist for highly educated women, and all that most people know of women with PhDs is that they must spend most of their time studying. This greater degree of uncertainty generates a greater degree of discussion and rumour-spreading.
A second factor is that there are reasons why highly educated women might be perceived to be less desirable as potential marriage partners than high-income women. Having a high income could be a blessing for both the woman concerned and her future or current husband, bringing them the comforts of a materially rich life. On the other hand, a high education is not a guarantee of such material comforts, and might be perceived to render the potential or actual husband vulnerable to an unwanted intellectual challenge at home.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with two questions: How are ideal marital partners conceived of in urban China today? And, how do high-status women stack up against these understandings? Chinese academic studies, the popular press, and marriage agency materials assert that central elements in mate preference included, on the part of women looking for men, superior socio-economic standing and prospects. From the angle of men looking for women, the most desired qualities were youth, beauty and temperament. For women, then, hypergamy was a central feature of their thinking about ideal mates. While this understanding was also clear on the part of men, particular personality and physical characteristics were more frequently publicly sought. These sources and the ideas they elucidated suggest that high-status women, particularly in terms of education but also in terms of income, were likely to face a less than welcoming culture of mate preference.

The media portrayal of highly educated and high-income women presented a stereotypical view that both sets of women were more likely to be single than was the norm. The major point at which the content of the two discourses
diverged was on the issue of agency. In the case of highly educated women, the general tenor of the discourse suggested that many were single due to being undesirable to men. By contrast, that many high-income women were unmarried was seen to be largely due to their own choice. Thus, although these women were in effect seen to be in similar situations, understandings of them differed.

Discourses can be ways of attempting to enforce a more stable, moral order in periods of social change. Highly educated and high-income women are likely target groups both because they have blossomed during a period of intense economic and social flux, and because of the tradition of women being seen as scapegoats during such periods. It does appear that there is more said about the highly educated women than the high-income women, and there are a number of reasons for this, including greater degrees of curiosity and fear attached to the highly educated group.

There are a number of questions which arise from the above. One is the question of whether the claims depicted in the media bear any resemblance to reality. What situations do highly educated and high income urban women find themselves in China today? Are they single, as suggested, or married, or in an intermediate position of some sort? Are they aware of the discourses which seek to position them in a certain way against marital norms, and how do they feel about these if they are aware? It is to this question of experience, of what situations these women are in and how they express this, that I now turn.
The previous chapter showed that there are discourses in China that suggest that both high-income and highly educated women are not the most desirable of women and that they will probably have difficulty in looking for a romantic partner. In the remainder of this dissertation I will be examining what the reality is for these women, and how these women explain what it is like to experience this reality. I will explore the personal situations of highly educated and high-income urban Chinese women and how these women came to be in these situations. Are they aware of the discourses which seek to position them in a certain way against marital norms? And how do they feel about these discourses if they are aware of them?

I begin this chapter with a preliminary discussion of the range of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ romantic and personal arrangements that are present in China today and the findings of statistical surveys on the spread of these arrangements across various population groups. I will then demonstrate that there is in fact a vast range of romantic situations in which high-status women find themselves, conventional and unconventional. I will do this primarily by presenting data from my interviews with seventy high-status women in Beijing.
Part One: The range

By far the most common path trodden by Chinese women today is to marry, have a child with their husband, and to stay with that man for the rest of their life. Statistics, which I will explore in detail below, show that this pattern is the most likely one for urban as well as rural Chinese. This remains the norm against which other romantic choices in a woman’s life course are measured and compared.

Nonetheless, a range of what are considered ‘non-traditional’ romantic and personal arrangements has developed. Strong anecdotal evidence, supported by a careful reading of the statistics, indicates a growth in such alternative arrangements. These arrangements are ones which are familiar to a Western readership – indeed the relatively recent appearance of some of the options as viable alternatives may be surprising to some Western readers. Cohabitation, divorce, remarriage, single parenthood after marriage, single parenthood without ever marrying, lasting singledom, having multiple concurrent partners, relatively open homosexuality, and marriage without children have all become more common now in urban China than was the case before the reform era.

The broad statistical picture

An examination of official statistics, supported by data from research reports and other surveys, provides concrete measures with which to assess personal relationships in modern-day China. These statistics make it clear that the vast
majority of Chinese men and women, regardless of their location, get married. In addition, they get married early, and their marriages almost always last.

Official figures for recent years can be drawn from “China Statistical Yearbooks” – compendia of key statistics published by the Chinese Bureau of Statistics that report the figures from sample surveys conducted in the previous year. My fieldwork was conducted from the middle of 2004 to the end of 2006, with interviews taking place in 2005 and 2006, and therefore for comparative purposes in this chapter I use statistical data collected during this period. I rely predominantly on the China Statistical Yearbook of 2006, which contains the most comprehensive data from this period, being derived from the One Percent Population Survey of 2005. Where other sources of data are more fruitful or relevant, I make use of such sources.

Where possible, I provide figures both for China and for Beijing. Statistics for Beijing are immediately relevant in terms of the location of my interviewees and also useful in understanding the differing marital norms present in China’s larger metropolitan centres. As a result of the different features of life in the city versus life in the country, social habits and understandings differ, including those around marriage. For example, greater independent engagement with the non-familial world in urban areas, through education and work outside the home, contributes to average ages at first marriage tending to be higher in urban areas. In addition, the need for additional family members who can assist with manual labour such as agricultural work has typically hastened marriage and childbearing in rural areas. Therefore, while national figures of

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1 The One Percent Population Survey is China’s major inter-census nationwide data collection activity, also managed by the Bureau of Statistics. Conducted every ten years in years ending in five, the survey is considered the most comprehensive snapshot available until the next full census is conducted five years afterwards. As the name suggests, one percent of the total population of China is surveyed, with the sample drawn representatively from across the country.

course include a substantial proportion of rural residents and are therefore less directly relevant to the circumstances of the urban women whom I study, these statistics nonetheless play an important role in illuminating national marital norms and I include them on this basis.

Marriage

Official statistics make it resoundingly clear that marriage remains a common rite of passage in contemporary China. The One Percent Population Survey shows that only 19.17% of Chinese 15 years of age and over (urban and rural combined) were not and had never been married as of 2005. 71.90% were on their first marriage, 2.20% had remarried, 0.99% were divorced, and 5.74% were widowed.\(^3\) Therefore, in total 80.83% of Chinese persons 15 years and over were now or had previously been married. For Beijing, this figure was 76.75%. For women across China, 15.91% had never married, and for women in Beijing this figure was 20.36%.

Such figures do not, however, tell the whole story of the likelihood of the average Chinese or Beijing person marrying in their lifetime. This is because they take a snapshot of the marital situation at a particular point in time. And at any point in time in China, given that the legal minimum ages for marriage are 20 for women and 22 for men, there are between five and seven years in the 15 years of age and over category during which it is not even permissible to marry. So, of the nineteen or so percent of people who appear as never-married in these data sets, we can safely assume that a good proportion of them are not married in part because they are not legally old enough to be.

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Another way in which to view the rate of marriage in China is to look at people later on in life and note what proportion of these people are or have ever been married. By the age of 60, a Chinese person is very likely to have been married at least once in his or her life. This is irrespective of location, gender, and, presumably sexual orientation. As of 2005, at 60 years of age only 0.16% of Chinese women, 4.05% of Chinese men, and 2.14% of the overall Chinese adult population had never been married. The corresponding figures for those in Beijing who were 60 years of age and had never been married are 0.29% for women, 1.16% for men, and 0.68% for adults overall. One might notice that while proportions of 60-year-old women who have never married are similar in both Beijing and China as a whole, the proportion of men who have not married by this age is significantly greater for China than for Beijing. This perhaps reflects the greater imbalance in gender ratios in rural areas, and the tendency for women to seek out men who offer a better life – with an urban residential registration being one determining factor. The general conclusion from this picture, however, is that marriage in both China and Beijing appears basically universal. Again, however, this is a snapshot. What it shows is that if you were a 60-year-old person in China in 2005 there was a 98% chance you would currently be married or have been married previously. If you were in Beijing and 60 years of age, there was a greater than 99% chance you were or had been married. Unfortunately, as a snapshot it cannot predict the future nor take account of emerging trends in marriage choices. These percentages do not, for example, indicate the percentage of today’s 30-year-olds who will, in 30 years’ time, be married or have been married.

Another method of measuring marriage in China is to look at what is called the annual marriage rate, that is, the numbers of new marriages occurring during a

\[4\] Ibid.
given period.\(^5\) This rate has fallen over the past fifteen years. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the rate was 15.6 per 1,000 in 1994, 14.4 per 1,000 in 1998, and 12.2 per 1,000 in 2002.\(^6\) This is a significant decrease in the numbers of people getting married each year, and suggests that whilst marriage in the future is still likely to be the most common marital status, its near-universal hold may weaken somewhat over time.

For the foreseeable future, though, marriage remains on the agenda for most Chinese people within the first decade of their attaining adulthood. This is especially the case for women. The 2005 One Percent Population Survey shows that at the age of 30 only 3.66% of Chinese females had never been married. This does not represent a large change from the statistics from the pre-reform period given in Chapter 2. As I explained in that chapter, data from the One in 1,000 Fertility Survey of 1982 shows that 98.6% of 30-year-old women were married at that time.\(^7\) Breaking the 2005 figures down further, one can see a significant difference between the risk of marriage for 30-year-old women in Beijing and that for 30-year-old women in China: 10.31% of 30-year-old Beijing women have never been married, which, while still quite a small proportion of the sample, is nonetheless more than two and a half times larger than the proportion of 30-year-old Chinese women who have never been married. For men, marriage is a little later: by 30 years of age, 14.04% of Chinese males and 21.50% of Beijing males had never been married. So, depending on what cohort a Chinese person belongs to (male or female, Beijing or China generally), by 30 years of age a minimum of 79.50% (the figure for Beijing males) and a maximum of 96.34% (the figure for women in

\(^5\) Some may prefer to understand this as the ‘annual wedding rate’.
\(^7\) See Pi-Chao Chen, ‘China’s Other Revolution: Findings from the One in 1,000 Fertility Survey’, *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 10/2 (1984), pp. 48-57.
China overall) have been married. In other words, if you are a 30-year-old person today it is most likely that you are already married.

The small decrease in the likelihood of marriage between 1982 and 2005 is in part due to the gradual rise of age at first marriage in China, particularly in urban areas. Chinese Academy of Social Sciences figures for 2006 give the average age of marriage as 26.1 years for Beijing women and 28.2 years for Beijing men. This is a significant increase on previous years. Figures provided in Chapter 2 showed that in 1991 the average age at first marriage for Beijing residents (male and female combined) was 24.44 years, and in 1996 it was 25.16. With regard to average age at first marriage for Chinese women as a group, another report states that in 1991 it was 22.23 years of age, in 1996 it grew to 23.20 years of age, and in 2001 it reached 24.15 years of age. For women in Beijing, the average age of first marriage was 24.44 years in 1991 and 25.2 years in 2001. This represents an increase between 1991 and 2001 of almost one year, and another increase of almost one year between 2001 and 2006. If this trend continues we will see even greater average ages in at first marriage in urban areas in the next few years.

Looking at the situation in Beijing broadly, the overall breakdown of the marital status of Beijing residents 15 years and over in 2005 is as follows:

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8 Anonymous, ‘Urban Chinese Say “I Do” Ever Later in Life, Study Finds’, People’s Daily Online (updated 4 January 2008) http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90782/6332700.html, accessed 19 February 2008. The article continues: “Those aren’t even the nation’s oldest newlyweds. The average age for first marriages in Shanghai was 31.1 for males and 28.4 for females in 2006…the oldest ever in China. CASS found that the average age for first marriages in Beijing was 19.17 for men at the beginning of the 20th century, rising to 25.87 by the end of the millennium. For women, the respective figures were 18.28 and 24.17 years.”


Table 7: Marital status of Beijing residents 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Proportion of all residents (%)</th>
<th>Proportion of men (%)</th>
<th>Proportion of women (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>23.25</td>
<td>26.07</td>
<td>20.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First married</td>
<td>68.78</td>
<td>68.06</td>
<td>69.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>6.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China Statistical Yearbook 2006, drawing from the One Percent Population Survey of 2005.\(^{11}\)

The table below provides a summary of marital statuses in Beijing and China by total population, male residents and female residents.

Table 8: Comparison of the marital statuses of the Beijing and Chinese population 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Percentage of total (%)</th>
<th>Percentage of men (%)</th>
<th>Percentage of women (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First marriage</td>
<td>71.90</td>
<td>68.78</td>
<td>-3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>+0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>+0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>-1.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China Statistical Yearbook 2006, drawing from the One Percent Population Survey of 2005.\(^{12}\)

The data shows that while most Beijing persons do marry at some point in their lives, fewer do so than is the case nationally. According to these figures, in 2005 4.08% fewer people in Beijing than in China had ever been married. But

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\(^{11}\) 中华人民共和国国家统计局, 中国统计年鉴2006, (北京: 中国统计出版社, 2006).

\(^{12}\) Ibid, p. 110 (Table 4-11).
while there is a significant Beijing-China difference in proportions of people 15 years and over who have never been married, the difference is even more marked when it comes to the case of women specifically. In fact, 4.45% fewer women in Beijing than in China as a whole are or have ever been married. Most of the difference between China’s and Beijing’s never-married figures is explained by fewer people being in the state of first marriage in Beijing. The comparative lateness of marriage in urban versus rural areas appears to be playing a role. Remarriage and divorce rates are comparable, and the figures for widowhood are slightly higher nationally than in the capital.

Through making comparisons between different year sets of Beijing data we can see that those who are never-married form an increasing proportion of the Beijing population overall, aside from what appears to be a small anomaly in the 2004 data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>2003 (%)</th>
<th>2004 (%)</th>
<th>2005 (%)</th>
<th>2006 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>22.47</td>
<td>24.04</td>
<td>23.25</td>
<td>23.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First married</td>
<td>69.39</td>
<td>67.78</td>
<td>68.78</td>
<td>68.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>4.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China Statistical Yearbooks 2004 to 2007.13

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The comparable data for women only in Beijing is contained in the table below. This table shows a rise in percentages of those who are not and have never been married, with one apparent anomalous year – in this case, 2005.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>2003 (%)</th>
<th>2004 (%)</th>
<th>2005 (%)</th>
<th>2006 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>20.09</td>
<td>21.60</td>
<td>20.36</td>
<td>22.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First married</td>
<td>69.04</td>
<td>67.79</td>
<td>69.51</td>
<td>68.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>7.27</td>
<td>7.16</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td>6.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: China Statistical Yearbooks 2004 to 2007.*

There are two main reasons that may account for the seemingly lower proportion of people who have married in Beijing as compared with China overall. One reason could simply be that fewer Beijing residents get married than do Chinese overall. Another possible reason is that people in Beijing get married later on average. As previously discussed, marriage in major urban centres in China tends to occur later than in the countryside.

*Divorce and Remarriage*

It is common to hear that divorce is rising in China. Divorce has risen particularly noticeably since October 2003, when, as noted in Chapter 2, the administrative requirements relating to divorce were considerably simplified. A major feature of this reform was that persons wishing to divorce no longer needed a letter from their employer or local official. Divorce became a private matter that could be executed with only testimony and paperwork from the two persons involved. Xinhua News, drawing from All-China Women’s Federation.
figures, reported that 1.33 million couples divorced in China in 2003, which was an increase of 154,000 (11.6%) on 2002.\textsuperscript{14} The effect of the October 2003 divorce reform is reflected in the 2004 data. In 2004, according to the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1.613 million Chinese couples divorced, representing an increase of 21.2% over the previous year.\textsuperscript{15}

Some reports state that the number of divorces in China rose 67% from 2000 to 2005, reaching almost 2 million in 2005.\textsuperscript{16} However, divorce nationwide appears to be at approximately 20% when measured as a percentage of marriages in a given year, with most figures placing Beijing’s divorce rate, the highest in the country, in the range of 35-50%.\textsuperscript{17} Yet despite what looks at first glance like a huge proportion of people getting divorced, Chinese divorce rates remain considerably below the rates of many more developed nations. When expressed using the more commonly used ‘crude divorce rate’, which gives the number of newly registered divorces per 1,000 estimated resident population in a given year, the differences are clear. According to United Nations figures, in 2003 the Australian crude divorce rate was 2.67, the rate in the United Kingdom was 2.80, and the rate in China was 1.03, that is, less than half.\textsuperscript{18} In China, women initiate the majority of divorces, and these are most likely to


\textsuperscript{16}Hannah Beech, ‘Breaking Up is Easy to Do’, \textit{Time}, 6 November 2006, pp. 31-34.


\textsuperscript{18}See http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/divorce.htm, accessed 3 March 2008 and unstats.un.org/unsd/Demographic/Products/dybyDYB2004/Table25.pdf, accessed 4 March 2008. This is drawn from the United Nations \textit{Demographic Yearbook 2004}, published in October 2007 by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. This data shows a divorce rate of 1.28 couples per thousand for China (consistent with my figures above). In the same year, the majority of European countries showed divorce rates of between 2.00 and 3.50 couples per thousand – that is, rates twice as high as China. The UN report did not give data for the United States, however according to the National Center for Health Statistics the annual divorce rate in the United States, one of the most divorce-heavy nations, was put at 3.6 couples per 1,000 people in the year 2005. This equates to about half of the marriage rate (7.5 couples per 1,000 people) for that year.
occur when women are aged 35-39. In addition, one-third of the couples divorcing in Beijing in 2006 had apparently only been married for three years.

Looking at the longer term, the graph below displays the crude divorce rate in China since 1985. From it we can see that there has been a slow but steady rise in numbers of divorced couples since 1985, with a plateau occurring in the late 1990s, a dip around 2002, and then a fairly sharp rise up through 2005. The years of sharp rise follow the changes to the divorce regulations instituted in 2003, and knowledge of these upcoming changes may account for the dip in numbers in 2002.

Figure 1: Divorce rate 1985-2005


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21 See Table 23-43.
The proportion of divorced persons in China has risen quite substantially over the past two decades, more than tripling in the twenty years from 1985 to 2005. The exact figures for each recorded year are provided in Table 11: Divorce rate 1985-2005.\(^{22}\)

For the “divorced” category, percentages have remained at just over 1% for the overall adult population and around 0.8 to 0.9% of the adult female population. In Beijing the figures for the 15 and over population increased slightly, from 1.49% in 2003 to 1.54% in 2006, and even more slightly for the adult female population – from 1.60% in 2003 to 1.62% in 2006.

Table 11: Divorce rate 1985-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Divorced couples per 1,000 people</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Divorced couples per 1,000 people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *China Statistical Yearbook 2006*.\(^{23}\)

---

\(^{22}\) One may observe that the figures in this table and graph appear different to those cited in the 2004 report on women’s status also authored by the National Bureau of Statistics. As I stated, in that report “graphs provided show that the divorce rate was 1.6 per 1,000 in 1994, 1.9 per 1,000 in 1998 and 1.8 per 1,000 in 2002.” The figures in this table and graph are consistently half that (with rounding) of the figures put forward in the 2004 report and quoted by others such as Nancy E. Riley. This is most logically due to the figures in the table being number of divorced couples, whereas the figures in the report are numbers of divorced people. I acknowledge that there is also a slight difference between this table and graph and the United Nations report referred to earlier in this chapter – for 2003 the UN report indicates a Chinese crude divorce rate of 1.03, whereas the table below gives a figure of 1.05. I do not consider this difference to be significant.

\(^{23}\) See Table 23-43.
In order to better understand how many Chinese people have ever divorced, it is necessary to combine the official data given for divorce with that given for remarriage. The reason for this is simple – the method of enumeration in China is such that those who are divorced (but not remarried) are counted as one group, “divorced”, and those who are divorced but have remarried are counted in another group, “remarried”. Thus, examining the “divorced” category alone does not capture all those who have experienced the formal ending of a marriage. The percentage of Chinese people 15 years of age and over who were remarried rose from 1.72% in 2003 to 1.86% in 2006, although the rise was not smooth and linear. This was also the case with the percentage of adult women who were married. In 2003 this figure was 1.83% and in 2006 the figure was 1.99%. As for Beijing, there was a decrease in the percentage of those who were remarried. For the adult Beijing population as a whole, figures decreased from 1.94% in 2003 to 1.56% in 2006. For the adult female population of Beijing, these figures were 2.00% and 1.54% respectively. The total percentages of people over 15 years of age who had at any point divorced or been divorced by their partners are provided in Table 12.

Table 12: Combined percentages of all remarried and divorced persons 2003-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>2003 (%)</th>
<th>2004 (%)</th>
<th>2005 (%)</th>
<th>2006 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of the Chinese population who have ever divorced</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of the Chinese female population who have ever divorced</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of the Beijing population who have ever divorced</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of the Beijing female population who have ever divorced</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: China Statistical Yearbooks 2004 to 2007.*

---

24 Data is from 中华人民共和国国家统计局, 中国统计年鉴 2003 through to 中国统计年鉴 2007.
From this table it appears that the percentage of ever divorced people has risen slowly across China since 2003, but in no way has that rise been smooth. In Beijing, the percentage of ever divorced people appear to have decreased, but again not in a smooth, consistent manner year on year. This table also shows that in absolute terms the number of Chinese adults who have ever divorced is low – at around 3% of the population. Nonetheless, with the overall rise in divorce of the last twenty years, remarriage has increasingly become a possibility for Chinese men and women. However, the most recent Chinese Statistical Yearbooks do not indicate a strong rise in remarriages year on year. This may in part be due to a creeping acceptance of cohabitation under certain circumstances. A number of articles in the Chinese press discuss the rise in cohabitation amongst widows and widowers.\(^{25}\) My fieldwork experience also suggests that many men and women, burned by first, unsuccessful marriages, are reluctant to remarry, even if they are living with and committed to a new partner.

*Other arrangements*

Arrangements such as cohabitation are not reported in China’s official statistics. This reflects the continuing official position that men and women should only live together if married. Nonetheless, despite the official line, my fieldwork observations indicate that incidences of cohabitation are most certainly on the rise in China. Statistics are readily available on people’s opinions about the practice. In a year-long national survey conducted by the psychology department of Beijing Normal University, which gained a great deal of coverage in the Chinese press, only about 3% of the 2 million people interviewed were

opposed to unmarried couples living together. $^{26}$ 51% of people said they would try it themselves if the opportunity arose whilst 45% said it was not for them personally but they understood and accepted why others made the choice. While increased acceptance does not necessarily equal increased prevalence, there are compelling reasons to believe that this may indeed be the case. That more than 50% of people admit they would try it themselves indicates cohabitation is now becoming a real option for Chinese people in serious relationships. The fact that an additional 45% of people were not terribly concerned by the idea makes it an option entailing less fear of the scorn of neighbours, friends, and colleagues. Under these conditions, it is foreseeable that the option will increasingly be taken up, even if simply as a step on the way to marriage.

Another increasingly common arrangement is that of single parenthood, which can be arrived at in various ways. The most common way is through divorce. Historically, where divorce has occurred, it was generally expected that the husband (and the husband’s family) would be given custody of the children. My own fieldwork suggests that, in Beijing at least, this is no longer the case. Of the women I spoke to who had children and were divorced all had primary custody of the children.

The second and considerably less prevalent method through which single parenthood is achieved is through the accidental or deliberate conception of a child outside of wedlock. Sometimes this results from unprotected sexual activity, but there are also women who seek out IVF-type techniques in order to have a child on their own and on their own terms. Whilst it is illegal in most parts of the country for unmarried women to undergo artificial insemination,

there are some areas of China, such as Jilin province in the north-east of the country, where it is permissible. Legislators in Jilin were quoted as saying "some women won't get married, but they still hope to have a child. Such cases are rare, but their basic fertility rights should be respected nonetheless. The regulation aims to protect a citizen's fertility rights to the maximum degree." Generally speaking, this treatment is only available to those women whose registration (hukou) is in the province concerned. For some particularly well-off and particularly determined single women who are not registered in these provinces, going overseas to receive fertility treatment has become a possibility.

Reliable statistics are not available for how many people opt for lasting singledom; having multiple concurrent partners; and homosexual encounters or relationships, although in regard to the latter estimations are frequently made and tend to range from five million to tens of millions. Anecdotal evidence, provided through media commentary and personal interactions, suggests that each of these is on the rise, to differing degrees. The statistically observable decrease in the marriage rate suggests increasing scope for the exploration of these possibilities by Chinese people.

Part One of this chapter has illustrated that the path of marriage, a child, and a lifetime with one spouse continues to be the norm in China, although there is some weakening of its hold. The alternatives discussed above may be difficult for less economically independent women in more traditional areas to take up.

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28 Ibid.
29 This issue was raised by a number of my interviewees and was mentioned by other women I spoke to during my fieldwork.
However, they are options that are well within the grasp of many urban, educated women with good incomes. We shall now turn to the experiences of the seventy women I interviewed in order to examine whether or not these options are being taken up by women in this group.

Part Two: Seventy women – how many paths?

During 2005 and 2006 I conducted interviews with seventy Chinese women in Beijing. All of the women I interviewed lived and either worked or studied in Beijing. Located in the nation’s capital and one of China’s most developed cities, they all had access to a range of personal, cultural, educational and economic experiences and possibilities. These women, on the surface, shared many similarities – in location, in age, and in status through education and income. What about similarities in their romantic or marital lives? What choices did these women make in these realms? Did their education or income appear to have similar effects on their romantic life courses?

I spoke with many of the women on more than one occasion over the course of my research during 2005 and 2006. On the basis of their circumstances at the first interview, 71% of these women were currently in some form of relationship, and only 29% were not. Across the group of seventy women, 36% were currently married; 26% had a current boyfriend; 24% were single and had never been married; 6% were divorced; another 6% were engaged but not living with their fiancé and 3% were engaged and living with their fiancé. None of the

31 More detail on my interviewees and methodology is included in the introductory chapter.
32 Figures may not total 100% due to rounding.
interviewed women was living with a partner without the intention of marrying in the immediate future.

There were some variations in the relative ranking of different romantic situations between the high-income and highly educated women of the group. Among the highly educated, the circumstances were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Romantic situation (highly educated)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Currently married</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single and have never been married</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>With a boyfriend</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Engaged but not living with their fiancé</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Divorced and still single</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Living with a partner but not engaged to them</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Engaged and living with their fiancé</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within the high-income group, the circumstances were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Romantic situation (high-income)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>With a boyfriend</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Currently married</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Single and have never been married</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Divorced and still single</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Engaged and living with their fiancé</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Engaged but not living with their fiancé</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Divorced and living with a new partner</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Living with a partner but not engaged to them</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures may not total 100% due to rounding.
For each of the two groups, the percentages of people in and out of relationships were equal, standing at 71% and 29% respectively. However, there were some noticeable differences in the kinds of relationships they were involved in. Within the highly educated group, the most common situation was marriage. Forty-three percent of the highly educated women fell into this category – which is about 60% of the women in that group who were in relationships at all. The next most common scenario was that they were single and had never been married – this was the case for almost 26% of those interviewed. Within the high-income group, however, the most common situation was having a boyfriend. This was the situation of 31% of my high-income interviewees, equating to 44% of the women in that group who were in relationships. Currently married was, by contrast, the second most popular situation, coming in at 29%. This was 14% less than was the case for highly educated women. Relatively equal numbers of women in each group were single and had never been married – compared with the 26% of highly educated women in this situation, the figure for high-income women was 23%. Small numbers of women in both groups cohabited. However, in all cases this was with a man they were expressly intending to marry. No women in either group made direct or indirect reference to being involved in a same-sex partnership past or present, despite my attempt to make sure all interviewees felt comfortable that I would be accepting of this. At least one woman in each group had divorced. There were three single mothers, all in the high-income group, all of whom had divorced after starting a family. All mothers had primary custody of their child. None of my interviewees had given birth to a child outside of wedlock.
As noted, the above summary reflects relationship statuses at the time I conducted my first interviews with these women in 2005 and 2006. I met with a number of the interviewees many times, and have remained in contact with most of them. As of January 2008, most of the women in both sub-groups continued to be of the same relationship status as at the time of first interview. Among the highly educated women, two women who were engaged did get married to their fiancés, and one woman married the man who was her boyfriend at the time of first interview. Among the high-income women, I was able to confirm that one of the women who was never-married and single at the time of first interview now has a boyfriend; one woman who was divorced and single was now engaged to and living with a new man; one woman who was divorced and had a new boyfriend was now married to that boyfriend; two women who were then engaged and living with their fiancés were now married; one woman had broken up with her boyfriend at the time of interview and was now married to another man; and finally one woman who had been in a relationship was now single. No women in either sub-group had separated or divorced from their husbands since the time of first interview.

The question arises of how these women’s marital statuses at time of first interview compare with official national and Beijing statistics. First, if we retabulate the interview data into the format found in the official statistics, the results for my highly educated interviewees are as follows:
Table 13: Official marital status of highly educated women at first interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Number of persons</th>
<th>% Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First married</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Personal interview data*

The results for the high-income interviews are:

Table 14: Official marital status of high-income women at first interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Number of persons</th>
<th>% Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First married</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
<td><strong>101</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Personal interview data*

These statistics show that the women of my two sub-groups are far less likely to get married than is the norm. When compared with data from the One Percent Population Survey of 2005, my calculations show that 34% more women in my highly educated sample were never-married than is the case for Beijing women generally, with 38% more being never-married than is the case for women in China generally. Around 30% fewer women were married (i.e. in

35 Figures may not total 100% due to rounding.
either a first or a later marriage). Regarding the high-income sample, 43% more women in my high-income sample were never-married than was the case for Beijing women generally, with 47% more being never-married than was the case for women in China generally. Around 45% fewer women were married, when one combines figures for first or a later marriage.

While the above discussion introduces an interesting contrast, it does not address one very important issue: that of the ages of those interviewed. The average age of each cohort was around 30: specifically, 29.8 years for the high-income women and 32.2 for the highly educated women. Comparing the marital circumstances of my interviewees with the marital circumstances of other women of the same average age is one way in which to introduce more direct comparability of the data. Official figures for the marital status of every age from 15 to 60 are only available for 2005, not 2006. This was a line of enquiry pursued in the One Percent Population Survey, but one which does not constitute part of regular Yearbook data collection.

Below is a table (Table 15) comparing my highly educated sample (n=35), whose average age was 32.2 years, with 32-year-old women in Beijing and China. Columns two through four of the table show the percentages of women – in Beijing, in China, and of members of my highly educated sample – who find themselves belonging to the various marital statuses. Column five compares the percentage of highly educated women in a given marital status with the percentage of 32-year-old Beijing women of this same status. Column six compares the percentage of highly educated women in a given marital status with the percentage of 32-year-old Chinese women in this same status. A result of, say +20 in the never married row of the final column would signify that 20% more women in my highly educated sample are never-married than is the case for 32-year-old women in China generally. However, the difference is
in fact considerably greater: whilst only 2% of 32-year-old women in China were never-married in 2005, 54%, or 52% more, of women in my highly educated sample were never-married at this same point in time. Compared with 32-year-old women in Beijing, 48% more of my highly educated women were never-married. The far larger percentage of people in the highly educated sample who were never-married is all but cancelled out by the much smaller percentage of highly educated women who are first married. Differences in remarriage, divorce, and widowhood figures are not nearly as marked.

Table 15: Marital status of highly educated women sample with women of Beijing and China (2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>(1) Women at 32 – Beijing (%)</th>
<th>(2) Women at 32 – China (%)</th>
<th>(3) Highly educated sample (%)</th>
<th>Difference between (3) and (1) (%)</th>
<th>Difference between (3) and (2) (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>6.35</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>54.29</td>
<td>+47.94</td>
<td>+52.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First married</td>
<td>90.39</td>
<td>94.50</td>
<td>42.86</td>
<td>-47.53</td>
<td>-51.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-1.52</td>
<td>-2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>+1.23</td>
<td>+1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China Statistical Yearbook 2006 and personal interview data.

Second is a table (Table 16) comparing my high-income sample (n=35), whose average age was 29.8 years, with 30-year-old women in Beijing and China. Again, columns two through four show the percentages of women – in Beijing, in China, and of members of my high-income sample – who find themselves belonging to the various marital statuses. Column five compares the percentage of high-income women in a given marital status with the percentage
of 30-year-old Beijing women in this same status. Column six compares the percentage of high-income women in a given marital status with the percentage of 30-year-old Chinese women generally.

Table 16: Marital status of high-income women sample with women of Beijing and China (2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Women at 30 – Beijing (%)</th>
<th>Women at 30 – China (%)</th>
<th>High-income sample (%)</th>
<th>Difference to women at 30 – Beijing (%)</th>
<th>Difference to women at 30 – China (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>10.31</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>62.86</td>
<td>+52.55</td>
<td>+59.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First married</td>
<td>88.29</td>
<td>93.32</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>-59.72</td>
<td>-64.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
<td>-1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>8.57</td>
<td>+7.76</td>
<td>+7.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China Statistical Yearbook 2006 and personal interview data.

In this table we see that there is an even more substantial difference in percentages of women who are never-married and first married. 59% more women in my high-income sample were never-married than was the case for 30-year-old women in China, and approximately 53% more compared with 30-year-old women from the same city. And obversely, around 60% fewer high-income women were first married than was the case nationally or in Beijing.

When compared with Beijing women of a similar age, members of my highly educated sample were nearly nine times as likely to be never-married. They were half as likely to be in their first marriage, and half as likely to be divorced. The women of my high-income sample were over six times more likely to be never-married than women of a similar average age in Beijing, and again about
half as likely to be in their first marriage. They were over three times as likely to be divorced and not remarried. Using this method at first glance appears to give credence to the idea, central to the discourses discussed in the previous chapter, that these high-status women are less marriageable than other women.

However, taking an average age of interviewees fails to recognise the significant number of women who do not fall within five years either side of this age: 14 women in the high-income sub-sample were outside the 25-35 range, and 16 women in the highly educated sub-sample were outside the 27-37 range. One possible way to take this into account is to break the marital status data of my sample into age bands or ranges and compare this with national and Beijing data on marital status by age range. However, as my interview sample consisted of only 35 people in each sub-group, and these women were spread out over a 33 year age span, there is an insufficient number of interviewees in any age group to be able to carry out a sound statistical comparison along the age band lines. At most there are 13 people in an age band, and as few as zero. Most age bands had between three and eight persons from each sub-sample.
Table 17: Numbers of interviewees in each age group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Highly educated group (%)</th>
<th>High-income group (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite these small numbers, I nonetheless present a comparison between the high-status women in my samples and Beijing women in general. Within the table below it is particularly worthwhile examining the marital status of the 25-29 and 30-34 age bands. My highly educated and high-income samples had very similar and relatively large numbers of women in these age bands. These age bands also allow us to reflect upon what happens to women of the different groups either side of 30 years of age – an age considered highly significant to a woman’s marital status in common understandings of the life course of an urban woman.

Table 18: Comparison of marital status by age bands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Highly educated group (%)</th>
<th>High-income group (%)</th>
<th>Beijing women (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22.86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A final method by which to compare the marital circumstances of my sample with broader norms is to move away from an attempt to directly compare exact percentages at different age points, and to make more general observations about the trends demonstrated by both my interview data and the official statistics. While this analysis draws its inspiration from the statistics, it is less quantitative and more qualitative, and therefore is possibly the most reliable approach given the size of my sample. The table above, despite its noted weaknesses, provides some clues as to where to start. For example, following this approach it seems that, contrary to the popularly held stereotype, most women in my sample are likely to get married eventually. The older they are, the more likely they are to have been married at some point, with the exception being those women who were in their 20s during the Cultural Revolution. In that sense, there is consistency with the broader data. However, an important observable difference is that the women in my sample did not marry as early as is the norm for the city in which they reside. In Beijing, levels of never-married women dropped sharply through the twenties; continued to drop, albeit at a much slower rate, in the thirties; and then slowly slid towards less than 1%. Within my sample, proportions of never-married women decreased at a far more smooth and leisurely rate. About as many women were unmarried as
married among my interviewees in the 30- to 34-year-old age group, whereas
by this point in time in the broader female population of Beijing, only 6% of
women were never-married, and over 90% of women were in their first
marriage. Thus, although numbers in my sample are not large enough –
particularly at the older end of the spectrum – to conclusively state that fewer
women in these high-status groups marry, we can conclude that if they get
married, they do so later.

The three above approaches – taking average ages, directly comparing figures
in age bands, and making general statistical observations – have all attempted
to address the issue of age as a factor in the spread of the marital statuses in
my interview sample. With regard to the larger question of the
representativeness of my sample, one way to test this is to compare it to a
broader set of statistics using approximately the same limits. Unfortunately
there is no all-China or Beijing data set for the marital status of either people
with PhD degrees or people who earn over 5,000 RMB per month. The closest
I have been able to find is data that shows the marital status of the Chinese
population according to certain levels of education. In this data, the focus is on
the most common levels of education, and as such there is not a specific set of
results for those who have or are about to obtain a PhD. There are, however,
results for those who have completed (or are enrolled in) postgraduate studies,
likely to be predominantly constituted of people who are undertaking or have
completed Masters degrees. Even though my highly educated sample had an
even higher level of academic qualifications, it would be useful to compare the
circumstances of my sample with this larger data set. In addition, given that
most of my high-income interviewees also had some tertiary education, which
often included Masters degrees, comparing their circumstances with this
broader postgraduate cohort is also worthwhile. Note that there is no age
breakdown for the data and it pertains to all persons 15 years of age and over, and that I have included a column for women in Beijing for contrast.

Table 19: Marital status of postgraduates in Beijing and China versus that of my interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Female postgraduates in Beijing (%)</th>
<th>Female postgraduates in China (%)</th>
<th>Highly educated interviewees (%)</th>
<th>High-income interviewees (%)</th>
<th>Women in Beijing (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>30.76</td>
<td>36.01</td>
<td>54.29</td>
<td>62.86</td>
<td>20.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First married</td>
<td>66.06</td>
<td>61.23</td>
<td>42.86</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>69.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>8.57</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>6.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China Statistical Yearbook 2006 and personal interview data.

The above table clearly demonstrates that female postgraduates in both Beijing specifically and China generally are less likely to be married than women without such qualifications. However, both groups of my interviewees were less likely to be married than even the broader postgraduate group. And it was the high-income group that showed the highest proportion of women who had never married, not the highly educated group.

From a pragmatic perspective one might contend that the lower levels of marriage in the highly educated group compared to the postgraduate group is due to the fact that any increase in the time spent enrolled in study might delay marriage even further and therefore decrease the percentage of the group who are married. International research generally supports this argument. 36 In relation to the high-income group, while their education levels may be

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comparable to the postgraduate data set, their average incomes are almost certainly much higher. If one applies a classical view of marriage as an economic exchange, perhaps these women have more to lose and less to gain by taking on the role of wife, and therefore either delay marriage or avoid it entirely.37 The potential of both explanations, as well as others, will be explored in future chapters.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered the range of marital arrangements existing in China today as well as the spread of these arrangements across different sub-groups of the Chinese population. Part One confirmed the statistical universality of marriage in China, but suggested a slow erosion of this universality. The number of people who have ever divorced is on the rise, as are the number of people who have never married at all. Although these increases remain small, they are significant when compared with the long and relatively stable picture of the marital union in China. Part Two of this chapter turned our attention to how high-status women fare in the contemporary marriage scene, with particular reference to the group of seventy women I interviewed in 2005 and 2006.

The first conclusion arrived at from this analysis is that high-status women are indeed less likely to be married than others as of age 30. A woman belonging to either of the groups of my sample is far more likely to be never-married, far less likely to be first married, and equally likely to have ever been divorced (remarried and divorced combined) than women of a similar age. The differences between my sample and the broader population are roughly

37 Gary S. Becker is known as the main exponent of the economic theory of the family. For an application of his approach in relation to education levels of women, see Blossfeld and Jaenichen, 'Education Expansion and Changes in Women’s Entry into Marriage and Motherhood in the Federal Republic of Germany'.
consistent with the only official data set that addresses this issue, showing the marital status of postgraduate women in Beijing. While an even smaller percentage of my sample is married than even this group, this is perhaps unsurprising. It is clear that there is a relationship between level of education and likelihood of being married, and the women of my highly educated group have an exceptionally high level of education. In addition, members of the high-income group have both generally high levels of education, similar to that captured by the postgraduate data set, and earn incomes significantly higher than most Beijing women, putting them again in another socio-economic group.

A second conclusion arrived at from a consideration of the circumstances of my interviewees may perhaps be better described as a hypothesis – one that I will attempt to explore in greater detail in the chapters that follow. It seems possible that the high-status women of my sample might not be married but may still be living a satisfying romantic life. While the percentages of both high-income and highly educated women in my sample who are never-married is very high, many of these women are not single. It is quite possible that fewer of the women in my sample are married either because i) they marry later or ii) they are in other situations they are happy with, and thus do not feel the need to change that situation. The first explanation is consistent with the idea that prolonged educational experience delays marriage. It is also consistent with the view that those who earn high incomes are usually in demanding jobs. For women with significant professional workloads, a keen awareness of what is typically expected of women when they become wives may cause them to delay marriage in an attempt to avoid the so-called double burden. The second explanation, that these women are in other personal situations they are happy with, is interesting in that it opens the door to the idea that these women may approach their romantic lives in a way that differs from other women. Do they have a greater awareness of the range of options available? Does their
independence provide them with a greater say in the development of their personal life course and reduce the real pressure to marry? And do their education levels, incomes, and life experience lead them to seek a different form of relationship to that sought by other women? These are the questions that will be explored in the following chapters.
Chapter 5: Desires and Decisions in the Personal Lives of Highly Educated Women

As was noted in the previous chapter, the seventy high-status women in my interview sample fell into a range of positions romantically and personally. In order to compare their circumstances to those of the Beijing population as a whole, it was necessary to aggregate these women’s circumstances into a small number of rather broad groups: never married, first married, remarried, divorced, and widowed. These groupings were useful in that they allowed a certain degree of quantitative comparison. Through comparing the trends evident in my interview sample with a range of other, larger data sets, it was possible to conclude that there was a greater variation in romantic circumstances among high-status women compared with other groups of women, and in particular that if these women did get married, they tended to do it later.

Analysing the romantic circumstances of these women against only five firm categories does not, however, adequately convey the degree of variety present in their personal lives, nor does it offer any hints as to the reasons these women are in these situations. To address these issues, we first need to examine in greater detail the current romantic situations and personal life courses of these women. As a start, let us revisit the data outlining the exact
types of arrangements these women are in (beyond the five-category mould). Of my interview sample of 35 highly educated women, 15 were married, 9 were single and had never been married, 7 had a current boyfriend, 3 were engaged (but none of these were living with their fiancés), and 1 was divorced and without a new partner. Of my sample of 35 high-income or white-collar women, 11 had a current boyfriend, 10 were married, 8 were single and had never been married, 2 were divorced and still single, 3 were engaged (2 of these were living with their fiancés), and 1 was divorced and living with a new partner. As tallied in Chapter 4, this meant that the percentages of people in and out of relationships were the same in both groups. In each group 71% of women were in relationships and 29% were not.

We also need to establish a framework for examining and analysing the possible reasons why these women are in the romantic situations they are in. At the level of why a smaller proportion of women within these groups are married than is the norm, three possible broad explanations arise. The first, suggested by the media and discussed in Chapter 3, is that these women want to marry but many are unable to. This is said to be either because men do not want them, because their own ideals about the perfect man are unrealistic, or both. The preliminary statistical analysis conducted in the previous chapter suggested a second explanation: that these women marry later. This explanation is consistent with the idea that prolonged educational experience delays marriage. It is also consistent with the common understanding that those in highly paid jobs are usually in demanding jobs, and that the demands of these jobs may cause women to delay marriage. A third possible explanation is that these women are in other situations they are happy with, and thus do not feel the need to marry. This explanation is interesting in that it opens up the door to the possibility that these women – perhaps in part due to their high education and incomes – are comparatively better able to make individual
decisions on what types of relationship most suit them, and feel relatively free to put those decisions into practice. Their work, study, and life experiences may also have led to their acquisition of different ideals about the nature of intimate relationships, heightening a desire for democratic life partnerships.

In this chapter and the one that follows I will examine in greater detail the range of romantic situations and personal life courses that my interviewees have experienced. In this chapter I will introduce some of the highly educated women I spoke to, and will explore the following questions: Are these women in the arrangements they are in out of choice? Are their romantic situations expressions of their sense of self and their own values, desires, hopes, and fears? Or, as the discourses have it, have those women who are not married lost out due to their lack of desirability as high-status women? In Chapter 6 the circumstances of the high-income women I interviewed will be presented and analysed.

Highly educated women: selected stories

The highly educated women I interviewed were, as previously mentioned, aged from their early 20s to their mid 50s. They were mostly academics, researchers, and postgraduate students, and earned base salaries from less than 1,000 RMB per month to over 5,000 RMB per month. Learning was a thread that ran through their lives, and most women had had an affiliation with one educational institution or another for as long as they could remember. The rigours of the highly competitive Chinese education system were something they knew only too well, and the demands of succeeding within this system had shaped the childhoods and early adulthoods of many of them. But what were the key
features of their personal lives and the ways in which they engaged, managed, and responded to developments within them?

In order to provide an introduction to the sorts of personal lives women in this group are leading, and some of the salient factors that have determined the courses of these lives, I shall first present four case studies of highly educated women. Following this, I shall examine what factors and considerations have influenced the personal lives of other women in this group, and identify patterns in the ways these women have sought to tell their stories in order to give meaning and sense to their circumstances.

Jane Lin — fortified by her faith

When I first interviewed Jane in April 2005, she was 42.¹ We met at her home, where she was warm, welcoming and friendly. A member of the faculty at a top Beijing university, she had an interest in social research and was keen to assist me with mine. With broad life experience and a philosophical mind, she shared her own critical perspective on changes in Chinese society, and in particular the rise of divorce, extramarital affairs, and formal religion. Her opinions on all of these things were affected by her strong adherence to the Christian faith, a faith she discovered while completing her PhD in Hong Kong.

Jane got married at 24 years of age and divorced ten years later. She said,

I got married for my mother. That was the major reason …. I am a good girl. I didn't want to bother [my parents] any more. And because my parents'
marriage was very bad I didn’t think I would have a good marriage. But I thought that my mother would be worried if I didn’t marry. So I did it for her; everything was for her.

I asked Jane about the divorce. She explained that,

Even though I lived a painful life in marriage I never considered divorce. It was very difficult for me to say no. He was a numb person who didn’t really understand my feelings. Communication wasn’t enough without some kind of emotional understanding. … I went to say no once, before we were married. But he cried. So eventually we got married.

One of the issues which led to their marital problems and eventually divorce was his relationship to his family, and her difficulties with this relationship. Jane said,

I had a lot of difficulties with his family when we got married. He also got married for his family. In China you marry a family, not a person. He always wanted me to please and serve his parents – go to their house every weekend and clean and cook and so on and so on. But after a while I just gave up on all this…. Then I wanted to live a single life within marriage – never depend on him, do everything myself… But he sensed nothing; he just cared about his work and his family.

Jane was very critical of the educational culture in China, and talked particularly about the educational institution at which she worked and where she had also done both her Bachelors and Masters degrees. She said that the university gives young people dreams but lets them down in the end. It doesn’t train or allow people to think, imagine, or assess society. “Also I was affected by growing up in the Cultural Revolution and also witnessing [the suppression of
the Tiananmen protests of June 4th, 1989 and then how everyone just moved on, and no-one even talks about what happened or the meaning of it. What about the future of Chinese society? This is a question I have thought about a lot.” In her own search for meaning, she turned to philosophy, but felt it empty. She then investigated religion and found meaning in Christianity.

Jane said that while she was doing her PhD in Hong Kong she was constantly thinking about what to do when she went back to China. A friend of hers had suggested that she leave her husband. She put this to him, but it took him two years to agree to a divorce. She said this was okay for her:

On the one hand I didn’t want to pressure him, and on the other, personally, I needed time to prepare myself for single life. It’s not like the West here. In the West you can still have your friends. It’s harder here. I must become very independent, just depend on myself.

Jane said she lost a lot of friends through the divorce. People did not understand, they thought that she was too sensitive and did not trust her, and as a result she began to withdraw from the social world around her.

Her ex-husband remarried two years after they divorced, and Jane said she finally felt release: “Because I wanted a divorce but he didn’t. If he set up a family again my burden is lifted; I get real freedom.” Jane’s mother died in 2004. Up to her death, she had exerted a great deal of pressure on Jane to remarry. “But I refused.” She said she herself had thought about remarrying, but could not imagine that the kind of relationship she wants was even possible in her society. She felt that there were many problems in human relations in China – a lack of basic standards for relating to others, a lack of social maturity and so on.
She complained that it was impossible to have opposite-sex friendships without others gossiping, and that people were having affairs left, right, and centre.

I asked what her ideal partner would be like. “Actually I never have set standards for an ideal partner. I just cannot imagine…. When I was your age my peers would often talk about this issue. Then we could give long checklists of criteria…. But now I cannot… I think you cannot find people by using standards.” She said that moral principles and understanding are important to her, and that she did not think she would find this kind of man in present-day China.

She said she loves being single – she never feels alone, and always feels enriched due to her faith. She thought that although people still found it strange that she was single, it seemed to be more accepted because at least she was married once. Yet people still always try to introduce her to new men, and other women are always worried that she might have an affair with their husband. She told the story of a wife of an old friend of hers who, completely out of the blue, told her to have an affair with him if she liked, but that they would never get divorced.

With regard to the status of men in China, Jane said: “society puts higher expectations on men. But they are not God, they can't do everything. They make so many women disappointed, especially in this society. Many women cannot feel satisfied with their marriages, with their relationships with men.” She said in this age of division of labour and service provision she did not need a man – in order to get things fixed, she could just call a plumber or an electrician. She cited this as one of the reasons she was happy to remain single hereafter.
Given that she had always been connected to universities, I asked Jane if she had heard any sayings about female PhDs. She said,

I think I am lucky as I didn’t receive any pressure about women with PhD degrees. Many people think men can find a girl with a lower education level than themselves, but women must go higher. At my university, when I was there as a student, I never thought that due to my high education I would have problems. Even my ex-husband supported me to study, encouraged me.

Her husband had a Bachelors and Masters from the same university that she went to, and that is where they met. But he did not want to go on to do his PhD.

Did she ever feel different to others because of her higher education? No. One, she was “surrounded by people with high educations. And two, it was a qualification in one narrow area, not in life or faith or being a good person.”

Louise Hua — happy at 40

Louise Hua was born in 1965, and was just about to turn 40 when I first interviewed her in June 2005. She was a lecturer at one of China’s most prestigious universities, an institution with which she had a 23-year long history. She started her Bachelors degree there in 1982, did her Masters there straight afterwards, and then took up a teaching position there upon graduation. She went back for further study at the university, starting a PhD in 1999 and finishing in 2002.

I asked Louise why she did not continue on to do the PhD immediately after her Masters. She said,

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2 Interview ED 050607L.
It had to do with the environment at the time…. It was 1989, and at that time in Chinese society people weren’t very interested in PhD qualifications or anything like that. People thought that the more a girl studied the worse it was, study to the point of stupidity – ‘stupid PhD, stupid PhD’. So who is going to want to do it then? Under those circumstances, I didn’t really want to. Why would I want to be a stupid idiot? So first I started work. But then later at work it became necessary to do one, so then I did. At the time I did it, people thought doing a PhD was the good life – having a high education was a good thing, so having a PhD is good. It’s really got to do with the environment at the time. In 1989, 1990, around this time, people thought doing a PhD was the equivalent to a joke, so how can you go on to do it, eh? But later, anyone who didn’t do one asks themselves why they didn’t. So yeah, it’s the same old story – it has to do with the times. The trend then was not to do one, otherwise you wouldn’t be able to find work.

Louise started her PhD in 1999, after she had been working for about a decade, partly because it had been announced that it would soon be a requirement for promotion in her workplace. Due to the development of the Chinese higher education system and the relatively late availability of doctoral degrees, many of those who were working as academics in China were doing so on the basis of Masters degrees. Louise said that she also decided to do her PhD at this stage because she felt her knowledge was insufficient, and she wanted to learn more.

I asked Louise if she had heard any sayings regarding female PhDs. “Yes I know. People say there are men, women, and the third sex are female PhDs. I think this is unfair to female PhDs; an unequal, unfair saying.” I asked if this saying was around when she was doing her PhD:
When I did my PhD it wasn't very blatant. This kind of thing mostly targets unmarried girls, in fact those who are already married won't face this kind of problem.... So because I was already married, and already a mother, people didn't make that kind of connection. But for unmarried female PhDs it's [marriage is] a big problem, so the saying mostly singles them out.

Louise got married straight after she graduated from her Masters in 1989. Her husband first worked as a lecturer at the same university, and then went to work for the government. They met at university. Although they were different majors, they met in a foreign language class. On the idea that men should be superior to their wives, Louise said,

There are women who don't think this way, but the larger proportion of women do. A man should be strong, somewhat outstanding – or at least the man should be more excellent than the woman. Most women think that when they look for a husband they want one who is a bit better than them. People still have that traditional view on the inside. Take for example my house. We are equal. And that’s just because I married another academic – if the two people are people of the same level, it’s natural for them to see each other as equals.... For example, if the man has a PhD and the woman has a Masters or a Bachelors, it’s possible that they will think he is a head higher...

She said her husband had no problem with her doing her PhD: “He supported me and knew that it was necessary for my work and that I really wanted to do it.”

On what she thought a woman should be like, what made a woman a woman, Louise said,
I think every woman has a different view on this. My personal view is that a woman should first be independent, be able to stand on their own two feet, not to rely on men, not depend on men to look after you. So I oppose full-time housewives. I think that in Chinese society to depend on a man for everything is really bad, because in China men are all chauvinistic. Men will think, if they provide everything… they’ll see the woman as being in an extremely low position, something like a servant.” She added, “I think now that to be a woman, first of all you have to have success in the home – be a good wife, be a good mother. But in actuality when you put these two things together, this kind of woman is extremely tired. And then when you add paid work to the equation… It’s very different to men. Men can just do well at work and that’s all people notice.

At the time of the interview, Louise was teaching three classes and also acting as a supervisor for Bachelors and Masters students. She had a son who was 13 years old and in his first year of middle school: “this also makes me tired, but there’s nothing you can do about it.” For Louise, motherhood is essential to womanhood, “because all women are mothers. Mothers, if they look after their children well, really love their children. To be a good mother is extremely satisfying.” She agreed that many women don’t have children these days but said, “if you are a woman and don’t have kids, life isn’t too complete, too perfect”.

Louise was happy to be turning 40. She said it was a good age, an age when you “understand everything”. She knew where she was and what she wanted: “From my perspective, although you could say I am a successful woman, I am not the most successful…. My aim is, I hope that I have the skill to join the ranks of Professor, that I have the opportunity to do so.” She also wants to see her son do better at school – she and her husband were both top of their
schools, and although she thought he had potential he spent more time playing than studying.

Wendy Zhang – all for love

Wendy Zhang and I first talked on a Sunday afternoon in April 2005.³ Wendy was 35 years old, and she was about two and a half years into her PhD. Wendy had an interesting story, which she claimed was unlike those of her fellow PhD students. Her route through to the PhD was not linear or typical, and she had more experience in the dirt and grime of the Shandong oil fields than she had of the clean classrooms of Beijing’s leading universities.

She began working at the oilfields in 1988, when she was 18. Life there was harsh. Despite not having finished Year 12, in 1991 Wendy began doing her diploma in order to open up opportunities for herself. In 1996 her work unit went bankrupt and was dismantled. Wendy said,

We stayed at home waiting for the next job. We had a wage, like a stipend, but it was very low. We just sat at home waiting until 1997, when we were sent down to clean the streets …until 1999. Then I went to do my Masters.

A major theme in my discussions with Wendy, on this day and on every occasion that followed, was the absolute centrality of her husband and her marriage to her life. She said that the eleven years they had been married had gone by very fast: “even now I feel like we are still courting… If I don’t see him, I am not interested in anything else…. In my life he is the most important thing.

³ ED 050417.
Second is my study.” She said it was love at first sight, and believed that, based on her experience, “love at first sight will make a good marriage.”

Wendy explained to me that she met her husband when she had just started work at the oilfields: “It was very very early on. I was only 18. Very young. He was 19.” They married six years later, when she was 24. She said her parents were unsupportive of their relationship, despite the fact that since both had been oilfields families for generations their backgrounds were almost identical and their life views were rather similar as a result.

But when I told my parents that he began to work at 15, and that he had no school leaving certificate, my parents thought that he would not be able to give me a good life. Because his income was too low, and he was far too young. But I was too young too! My parents said it was too early for us. But I loved him. I knew. I believed I was old enough. My parents and I quarrelled about this many times. But in the end they had to give in and accept him. They had no other choice. I wouldn’t listen to them.

Her parents need not have worried. Wendy’s husband had a vision for her achieving something in her life, and far from dragging her down he did everything he could to facilitate her success:

He encouraged me to study. He said that that was the only way I could have success, I could change my life.... He only graduated from middle school. He began to work at 15, very early. But he knew that knowledge, learning, was very important. And I loved him, so I felt I must study. But I think I also really quite liked studying...

Wendy said he encouraged her to try to fulfil her potential, despite what that might mean for him:
When I began to study, all the men in our team said to my husband ‘don’t let your wife study. She will go, fly, and she will leave you alone.’ But before we got married, he said to me ‘it’s too difficult for a woman to stay in the exploration team. If you have the ability to go away, go and never think about me. If you will have a good life, a good marriage, go. I will bless you. So don’t worry about me.’ … [My husband] is not like other men. Within the exploration team, it was very difficult for a man to find a girlfriend. There were too few girls. Every other man, once he finally found himself a girlfriend, held onto that girlfriend so tightly. So no-one understood my boyfriend. I was a good girl, and at that time I think I was beautiful… but he trusted me. He would do anything if it was good for me.

At what Wendy considered the peak of her husband’s career, he had become the driver for the leader of the work unit who had taken over management of the local oil fields. But he gave up this job in order to support his wife to come to Beijing and do her PhD.

When I graduated from Shandong University he asked me to go to Beijing and study at one of the best universities in the country. He said I should go to a school that’s that good. But I didn’t want to divide us. So I said to him – if you want me to go to Beijing, you have to come with me. He had a good job at that time. He enjoyed it. But he said if I agreed with him and made it my mission to go to Beijing and study at one of the best universities, he would quit. So when I began to study in preparation for taking the entrance exams here, he quit his job and waited for me to pass the test. Finally I was successful. So we came here together. But before he quit his job he got some money, like a separation payment. We’ve used this money to support us to study together without either of us having to work.

Wendy was aware that her husband’s sacrifices were unusual. She said,
In my country, almost everyone thinks the man is important and the woman should be behind him. The man should have a better income and a better education. The woman should stay in the home and wash the dishes, clean and cook. But my husband has always said that in a family, everyone is important….

Out of everyone I know, no-one has had an experience like me. No-one has had their partner quit their job for him or for her. In most of the families I know, the husband is better than the wife.

I asked if she thought he was the most ideal husband for her. She said,

Of all the men I know, he is the most perfect. But he said to me that there are a lot of perfect people, a lot of good men, you just haven't met them! Since I met him, after that very first time, I’ve never admired any romantic stories. Because I think that I am the happiest of all. I really treasure our marriage. It is the most important thing in my life. In all things and all decisions, the first thing I think about is my husband.

Wendy felt strongly that marriage is the ideal state for men and women, and that there is nothing much to be gained from single life. In fact, she firmly believed that people should find their partner and get married as early as possible:

I think men and women both should have a life partner. They should marry. It is a great shame for a man, when he is young, in this beautiful age, if he has no-one to share it with him. Because you are only young for a short time. 20 to 30 is a good time for everyone. To have no-one to share this with you really is a shame….. When you become older you pay more attention to income, houses…. You get too material. Feelings get ignored. When we met we were
only 18 – we didn’t know about houses, income. We didn’t know those things were important. The only thing important to us was feelings.

Wendy quizzed me about my love life. When I gave my typical response to this line of questioning in China – “I haven’t found the right person yet” – she looked me in the eye and said, “well, go look!!”

A sense of balancing life, of valuing its different sides, underpinned Wendy’s ideas about success. She liked to be busy at work, but in part because of what it could do for her personal life. Her decision to do a PhD was influenced by this kind of thinking – whilst she wanted to do it for her own feeling of success, she also wanted to do it so that she could take her husband abroad with her and open up a raft of experiences and opportunities for him.

Since Wendy was a current PhD student, I asked her if she had heard any sayings about highly educated women. She said, “if you are single when you get your PhD it will be too difficult to find a boyfriend because of your high education. If you have a post doc then it will be even more difficult. Maybe you’ll never find anyone.” I asked her if she thought it was true, and she said, “If you are a nice girl, if you like to smile etc, it will be very easy for you to find a boyfriend – if you want. If by 30 [years of age] you don’t find one, maybe you will have some problems.” So for Wendy being young and nice countered the high education – but if you are old as well as highly educated, it would be hard for a man to approach you even if he wanted to. With regards to the many female PhDs she knew, Wendy stated that those who were married were “normal, even if they have a PhD. But among those who are more than 30 and who haven’t married – all the ones I know are abnormal. Their temperament is strange. The things they talk about are strange.”
Wendy also believed that timing, and the selectivity of these highly educated women, contribute to why some female PhDs remained single:

Female PhDs want to marry a man who is very successful. So the man must have a high education, be very handsome, have sense of humour, and a high income. It is difficult because if the man is so perfect, they will have been discovered by other girls very early. In China people marry early. In my little city about 23-25. In large cities, about 24-28. If you’re more than 30… it’s too late. All the good men will have been taken.

Wendy went on to speak about the attitudes of many husbands to their wives undertaking a PhD: “in China female PhDs are still quite few in number. Because when you are married, your husband, most husbands, would prevent you from doing your PhD.” I asked why she thought this was so. She said,

Because these people have very strong (lihai) husbands. They rule the house. They are not willing for their wives to study. One reason is the PhD will be very ‘xinku’, very hard. They will do difficult work and not have time to be at home, so most husbands hope their wives will have more time to be at home and take care of the baby or their parents. If his wife gets a PhD she will get a difficult job and have no time to do these things.

Despite the ‘romance-novel’ nature of Wendy’s own personal life, she too found that the toughness of first her career and then her academic pursuits has meant she has had to delay some of the more important aspects of family life. At our first meeting, Wendy lamented that “my only regret is that I don’t have a child. I have no time to have a child. I want to have one next year – I hope it is not too late.” At our second meeting, I was happy to discover she had fallen pregnant. And in later correspondence, Wendy was very pleased to announce that at age 37 she and her husband had had a healthy baby girl.
Hanna – the Third Sex

My first interview with 30-year-old Hanna took place one afternoon in June 2005 in an office at Hanna’s workplace, a university in the east of Beijing. On this occasion we spoke for nearly two hours. In subsequent meetings in 2006, we spoke for several more hours. We have also exchanged a number of emails.

In essence, Hanna was the perfect example of a highly educated woman who struggled to find a partner. Hanna did her PhD at one of the top five universities in the country. She graduated in 2003 and started teaching Chinese literature shortly thereafter.

Hanna and I spoke about her future goals, in work and in life. She listed these as being “in work: keep doing what I am doing, working towards the completion of my research. Do new things well. And publish my book. In life: I don’t have a family. I would like to have one, as soon as possible.”

Hanna did not have a boyfriend, and explained that the main reason was that “it’s really hard to meet anyone. And people are biased against female PhDs here. The situation is getting worse and worse.” Hanna asserted that this bias against female PhDs,

...started in the mid 1990s. But actually there is a long history of discrimination against people with PhDs. Since the 1980s. After the reform and opening up. At that time everyone wanted to make money. The intellectuals weren’t engaged in this. So people thought they were stupid and couldn’t function well in this new society. After a while, people gave up discriminating against men with PhDs, as having these qualifications became a way to make money. But this was not the case for women. Especially for women who did their PhDs in

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1 Interview ED 050613Y.
the scientific and technical fields. It is these women especially who have such a heavy workload, they are in the laboratory all the time doing their experiments, they don’t have time to dress up, go out, have fun. So they are seen to lack something other women have.

Hannah disagreed with that view. She said,

As I see it, this kind of peculiar, strange, ugly female PhD totally does not exist; they are just not out there. 99% are extremely normal. They are all interested in the joys of life, in entertainment, fun, and so on… People think if you spend a long time in a laboratory or always with books you can’t do normal things like cook. And men think they should be the most important one in the house. If the woman in the house has a higher education or a higher income than him he will feel inferior. His friends will laugh at him and pick on him.

In order to find herself a partner, Hannah had tried many different methods – but in Hannah’s words: “as soon as they find out what you do and that you have a PhD, they instantly run away scared. People around me have also discovered this.” She recounted her experiences in this regard:

Older women tried to introduce me, especially my colleagues when I first came to work here. All the men they tried to introduce me to did not have PhDs. They all said ‘a woman with a PhD? No way’. So they gave you no opportunity to even meet and change their minds. So then they found me a PhD graduate. He asked where I graduated from. When they told him where, he baulked and said ‘I am just a PhD graduate from an ordinary school, not from a place like that’….. So then they found a man who had a PhD from one of the best universities in the country. But then he asked who my supervisor was. When they told him who it was [one of the leading figures of the discipline] he was like ‘oh, he is too famous’ and so he was also not willing to meet me either! …So all in all there
were over ten attempts at introductions made – but I never actually got to meet ANY of them.

I was curious as to whether there was any truth to the idea that women with PhDs might be excessively particular when it came to looking for a mate, so I asked what Hannah looked for in a partner. She laughed and said, “Ha! Many people ask me this. Many people say you should lower your standards.” I asked how important a man’s education level was. She replied,

Education has some importance. But it’s not the most important. In the list of the all the things I want it would be in last place. They don’t need a PhD – just a Bachelors degree or a Masters degree. The most important thing for me is loyalty, fidelity. These days the divorce rate is high, and there are often third parties involved in the breakdowns of these marriages. Many men are tempted into this. Men of all ages and types. So fidelity is the most important thing to me, because I want a stable household. The second thing would be patience, tolerance. The third thing would be being loving – towards himself and all others. Also, I like people who like animals. Other things are not so important – for example having a certain social position and a sound economic base would be good, but if they don’t have that I don’t mind.

I asked Hannah if she had had much pressure from her family regarding marriage. She said: “They have all been worried for a long time. I am worried about calling my mum, as she always brings this up! There have been times when she has sighed, and even cried, saying ‘you don’t have a boyfriend…’.” Hannah said that all her hometown friends are married, and her relatives constantly harass her mother about it. In response her mother began lying to inquisitive neighbours and relatives, but often could not remember what she told them! Hannah said her parents really want her to have kids; they do not
believe in marriage without them: “The reason they are so anxious now about my marital situation is that they want me to have kids. If you marry, have a child, then as a woman your major tasks are fulfilled.”

I asked Hannah what she thought about cohabitation without marriage. She thought that living together before marriage is a good way to work out suitability, having seen friends who had got divorced over little things they could have been made aware of by first living together. She did, however, feel that virginity was still highly valued by men in potential wives.

Hannah shared more of her views on what men wanted in women, making reference to men she knew, like former teachers who were married to women with PhDs. She said one of these professors once joked about it in class, responding to a male student’s question about what it was like to be married to a woman with a PhD – “You soon discover there are issues with two things: 1. who cooks? 2. your wife doesn’t look up to you. There is no sense of idealisation or mystique – she has a PhD, too, so she knows what you do all day.” Hannah said that although it was ostensibly said in jest, it was clear that the professor did in some respects think this way.

**Romantic circumstances of the highly educated group**

The stories of the above highly educated women are just four of the thirty-five that I have recorded. I have introduced them here for the purposes of outlining the kinds of romantic circumstances these women are in and the paths that they have taken in getting there.
The most common situation among my highly educated interviewees was that they, like Wendy Zhang and Louise Hua, were married. This was the marital state of 15, or 43%, of highly educated interviewees. Of these, six had a child and one was pregnant. However, eight of the highly educated women – a significant proportion – were single and had never been married, as was the case with Hannah Yao. Three of these single women, largely at the younger end of the spectrum, had not previously been in a relationship. Seven highly educated interviewees had boyfriends, some serious and some less so, and three interviewees were engaged when I first met them. A possibility highly educated women consciously considered was cohabitation, and, like Hannah Yao, many held the view that people should live together before they married. This had a practical basis, as an appropriate method through which to assess suitability to marry. Cohabitation in lieu of marriage did not appear to have been considered by any of the women in my highly educated sample. Certainly none were currently in that arrangement. Only one woman in my highly educated sample, Jane Lin, had divorced. Another woman, Sharon Liu, had married a man who had been divorced. So even though almost all of the women felt that divorce was becoming more commonplace, their own direct exposure to it was limited.

Overall, despite the possibility of living a single life, cohabiting, and divorce, the clear majority of the highly educated women were in more ‘conventional’ alternatives. By and large, these women were in serious relationships including marriage. Despite an acceptance of unwedded cohabitation they did not tend to practise it, and despite an awareness of the possibility of not having children within a marriage, rarely was this considering anything more than a temporary state.
Decision-making among highly educated women

What were the reasons for these women’s particular romantic and personal life paths unfolding in the ways that they did? Analysing the motivations of persons other than oneself is a task fraught with difficulties. Our chances improve if we can understand their values, fears, hopes and fantasies and how people conceive of themselves and the world they live in. The issue of personal identity is one that has been explored in the disciplines of psychoanalysis, gender studies, anthropology, cultural studies and beyond. Some of the approaches put forward are helpful in understanding the life paths of my interviewees.

The broad consensus among social theorists today is that one does not have a singular identity, which is fixed and unmoving. Instead, identity is often considered to be a process. This process of ‘identification’ is commonly understood to have both external and internal components, involving, as Richard Jenkins puts it, the “ongoing and, in practice simultaneous, synthesis of (internal) self-definition and the (external) definitions of oneself offered by others.” That is, working out who you are is a lifelong activity, and it is influenced by both the changing ways in which you think of yourself and the changing ways in which others view you. As this process of synthesis suggests, any given human being is the site of not one but multiple identities or selves. One’s subjectivity can be seen based on a series of subject positions, some

7 Jenkins, Social Identity, p. 20.
conflicting or mutually contradictory, that are offered by different discourses. It is as a result of this that people can be bestowed the same or similar labels but feel and act very differently. Jenkins calls this the difference between ‘nominal’ and ‘virtual’ identities or identification, stating that “the former is the name, and the latter is the experience, of an identity, what it means to bear it. It is possible for individuals to share the same nominal identity, and for that to mean very different things to them in practice, to have different consequences for their lives, for them to ‘do’ it differently.” So in the case of my interviewees, they might all be seen as high-achieving, high-status women, but this leaves plenty of scope for them to interpret their identities differently and act accordingly.

Related to this idea that identity is an ongoing, synthesising process involving a series of subject positions is Anthony Giddens’ concept of “the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives”. In simple terms, this is the notion of trying to continually keep track of who you are and what you stand for through filtered assessments of your experiences and thoughts and rearrangements of these experiences and thoughts in ways that help to make sense of your life. Giddens argues that this is particularly difficult in many contemporary advanced societies as there so many areas of doubt, fuelled in part by constant revision of understandings in light of new information or knowledge.

How do ideas such as these bear out in the stories of the four women outlined above? In my interviews, the highly educated women offered up to me personal or biographical narratives in an act that was both an expression of their subjectivities and a part of an active constitution and re-constitution of their

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11 Ibid, p. 20.
identities. Some ‘interpretative repertoires’ – that is, “systematically related sets of terms that can be recognised in the familiar and well-worn images that are known and understood through shared cultural membership” – were particularly noticeable in the stories of the four women introduced above.

Two factors appeared most influential in Jane Lin’s account of her personal life decisions. From her childhood to her twenties, her parents and in particular her mother exercised strong and effective influence over her life course. Jane claimed that she married largely to satisfy her mother, and that her expectations about what marriage might be like were largely formed in response to her parents’ unhappy marriage. In her thirties, after relocating temporarily to Hong Kong, Jane discovered Christianity. From this point on her faith provided the framework for her life decisions. It was in part the comfort and support networks provided to her by this faith that encouraged her to finally ask her husband for a divorce. This was a request made despite the extremely negative reaction it was sure to provoke from her mother, and despite anticipated unwillingness on the part of her then husband. But by this time, Jane recounted, it was time to do something for herself. She did not think she would remarry as she held little hope of finding a sufficiently equal, moral, respectful and mature partner.

For Louise Hua, again two major factors appeared to have been particularly influential in her personal life. First, her belief that wifehood and motherhood are the most important things in the world to a woman served her as a guiding compass. Recall her statement, “because all women are mothers… To be a good mother is extremely satisfying” and her position that “if you are a woman

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12 While my interviewees did give monologues completely uninterrupted by me the interviewer, my interviews were nonetheless loosely structured and interviewee-driven and required the interviewees to construct their experience through narratives shared with me. This approach is consistent with that employed in a study of single British women - see Jill Reynolds, Margaret Wetherell, and Stephanie Taylor, 'Choice and Chance: Negotiating Agency in Narratives of Singleness', *The Sociological Review*, 55/2 (2007), pp. 331-51.

13 Ibid, p. 335.
and don’t have kids, life isn’t too complete, too perfect”. At the same time Louise felt that it was essential to maintain freedom and independence as an individual and as a woman. Largely through developing her career she ensured that she maintained a degree of economic and personal freedom, always insisting that she was able to take care of herself. She spoke of her own professional goals which stood independent of her home life, and which she made sacrifices for. Her undertaking of a PhD program midway into her career and while she had a son in his early teens was an example of this.

Clearly the most important influence in Wendy Zhang’s life has been her love for her husband. In Wendy’s own words, it “affected every single decision” she has made. However, this was not always easy and at times had broader, even contradictory, ramifications. Wendy’s pursuit of an academic career despite her non-linear, non-typical educational route was fuelled in part by her husband. He encouraged her to fulfil her potential and believed that education was the only way for her to improve her life circumstances. The pursuit of such a career in turn influenced the course of her personal life, in particular the question of motherhood. This was an issue that was resolved after she had completed her studies.

Hannah Yao, who was unattached at the age of 30, felt that men did not want to have successful women as girlfriends, and that this constrained women’s choices and their chances of finding a suitable match. She was aware of the increasing difficulty posed by her age, and felt that her high level of education, more than anything else, acted as a barrier to her finding a mate. Her colleagues had made at least ten attempts to introduce her to someone in the hope that love would flourish. In all of these cases, the men were not even willing to meet with her after they had heard her educational background. The inability to find a partner is particularly troubling for Hannah, who, like Louise
Hua and others, felt that one of her primary desired identities in life was that of wife and mother. Her parents, and again particularly her mother, have amplified rather than eased the pressure.

What of the other women in the highly educated group? What thought processes, desires, and conceptions of self-identity commonly influenced these women? What interpretative repertoires dominate these women’s understandings and depictions of themselves?

Desires, fears, and understandings

I am a traditional woman – I believe being a wife and mother is central to womanhood

In the realm of what some might call ‘traditional Chinese values’, the belief that wifehood and motherhood are the most important things in the world to a woman served as a central construct for a number of my highly educated interviewees and a major axis around which their identities were constituted. The vast majority of the highly educated women wanted to marry and have a child, or had already done so. Given this, one might expect that most of my interviewees would openly state that wifehood and motherhood were central to their life purpose. However, only a few women, like Louise Hua, did so. It is possible that for many the idea was so obvious that they did not feel the need to express it. However, their understandings of what ‘normal womanhood’ meant seeped through in many comments, their narratives making it clear that this was a key framing concept for many of them. One such example is Rachel Chan, who on the eve of marriage said “I have always wanted kids – it fulfils, completes you, especially as a woman.”
Charlotte Wu, 27, was not married when we first spoke at her dormitory on a university campus in 2005. However, she had been dating a young man for four and a half years. The couple had already taken their wedding pictures, a modern-day ritual of dress and glamour which marked their commitment to an impending marriage. Charlotte said, “I think success for a woman is first to be a virtuous wife and good mother (贤妻良母), and second that she does well in her work.” This sense of who she was and what was important to her influenced Charlotte and a number of the other women not only to chase their desire to be successful in their career but also to wish to marry young enough to leave time to have children.

Amy Wang was a stunning young woman who had recently commenced a PhD program in the sciences. Amy was extremely careful to distinguish herself from female PhDs whom she identified as being too focussed on their studies, to the extent that they compromised their feminine appearance and demeanour. Amy told me that many of her undergraduate classmates encouraged her to be a ‘superwoman’ (女强人), and explained,

They feel that I have the ability and character to become that kind of person. At my old university I was an outstanding student, and was in the student leadership and so on. But my parents, especially my mother, often talk with me, often tell me ‘you must balance everything.’ I want to be a normal woman. To be a wife, to do some housework, I like doing that sort of thing... I like cooking! And I think taking care of others makes me feel happy and satisfied... My classmates, some of them, only know the surface of me. In my heart I think I will find my own happiness.

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14 Interview ED 050416W.
15 Interview ED 050416A.
Amy explained her point further when I asked her what she wanted to achieve in her life. She said, “A happy life… I want to be very excellent, outstanding, when I enter society… But most important is to have a happy family. And a child; I like babies.” Amy’s feeling that she was a ‘normal woman’ who cared about having a family and making a happy home influenced the way she managed and utilised her own perceived intellectual strengths. She felt she was young enough, at 23, to pursue a PhD without it creating obstacles for her personal life. Amy had a boyfriend of eighteen months, and was keen to marry him before she graduated, ensuring that her personal life goals could be met apace with her professional ones.

Amanda Shen, who was an engaged 30-year-old woman who had recently completed a PhD in politics at a university in Beijing, said that her goals in life in order were “to be a good mother, be a good daughter, be a good wife, [and] be a good employee.”16 This summary of roles and goals is not too far distant from the ‘three obediences’ discussed in Chapter 2, with the addition of the role of worker – appropriate to the reality of most contemporary Chinese women, both urban and rural.

*I value my career, and I am willing to put it first for a little while*

This belief is illustrated by the number of women who, due to their careers, had significantly delayed having a child even though they wanted to have one eventually. For instance, Wendy Zhang put off having children because she wanted to do her PhD and follow an academic career path. Melinda Qiu had a similar experience. She told me, “of course I want children. I wanted to have children after my graduation, but now I will probably do my post-doc for a few

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16 Interview ED 050531AS.
years.\textsuperscript{17} Melinda had already delayed children once in order to do her PhD, and at 33 years of age was about to do so again for at least two years as she had just been offered a coveted post-doctoral position at a leading Beijing university. Although there were no rules which stipulated that she could not have children while she was undertaking this post-doc, Melinda felt that the status of the institution and the cachet of landing a post-doc there carried an underlying expectation that she should commit herself purely to her research work, and again delay motherhood. In speaking about these situations, both Wendy and Melinda put forward a picture of being women who were aware of the opportunities being offered to them and whose immediate priorities were clear. They were careful to state that they did want to have children, just like other women, but it was just not the right time.

While Dorothy Sun had not put her work ahead of her child in the chronological sense, she certainly felt that she had done so in terms of priorities and care. Dorothy had completed her PhD while working full-time, raising a child, and maintaining a household. I asked if she found the balancing act difficult. She sighed and said “Yes. Those years, well, it’s really a long story... Why is my 15-year-old son in Year 8 instead of Year 9? .... It’s mostly because of me.”\textsuperscript{18} Dorothy explained that in order to do her PhD she frequently had to leave her son at home alone for hours at a time, and that over the course of the first year of her studies he sank into a deep depression, unable to attend to any of his schoolwork. Dorothy said that she ended up taking a year’s leave of absence from her PhD just to spend it with him, and to try to repair the damage that had been done. With guilt and sadness in her eyes she told me that it took her son almost that entire year to realise that his parents did actually love him. This experience of taking on too much and failing at balancing it all had a significant

\textsuperscript{17} Interview ED 050408. 
\textsuperscript{18} Interview ED 050607.
impact on Dorothy. She said that before she started studying she used to just think about what she wanted. But now when she thinks about something she wants she assesses what impact it will have on others.

Generally speaking, the highly educated women I spoke with were well-versed in the notion of trade-offs in life, and conveyed an understanding that, while they could achieve many and varied things in their lifetimes, it might not be possible to have success in all realms at the same time. When they spoke of putting their careers first, they were under few illusions that this would not have an adverse effect on other areas of their lives.

*I want to maintain my freedom and independence*

The Chinese popular press often highlights the considerable independence and personal freedom of high-status Chinese women. But only five of my interviewees explained that a desire for such independence and freedom was a factor that significantly affected their actions. Some depicted their delays in getting married as in part an expression of their wish to maintain freedom and independence. Sharon Liu had been against getting married for quite some time, but in her mid 30s changed her mind. At 39 she married, and at 40 had a child. On why she avoided marriage for many years, Sharon said, “I thought marriage would make me unfree, or that it would influence my work”.19 But in the end, she said, “when I reached middle age I wanted to have a family. This way your life is settled and complete.” Most of the other women I spoke to felt that freedom and independence could be fulfilled while one was married or in a serious relationship if the situation was managed properly. One example is the

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19 Interview ED 050623LX.
case of Louise Hua, discussed earlier. 44-year-old Denise Yin was another. Regardless of what these women believed constituted freedom or how they believed they could acquire or maintain it, it nonetheless formed part of the language they deployed when discussing their past and future lives.

*I am the one who knows who is best for me*

Some highly educated women, Jane Lin included, appropriated the notion of self-sufficiency to explain why they made certain decisions. They felt that they had the skills, capabilities and education to make the best decisions for themselves and to handle most eventualities. The most important thing, these women said, was to do what one felt was right for oneself, and to not care too deeply if that might offend another or appear to be an unusual decision. This belief largely surfaced in relation to choice of partner. Wendy Zhang’s story is illustrative. A second example is Rachel Chan, who remarked to me that she was about to marry a man with a Masters degree. As a woman with a PhD from a highly reputable university in Beijing and a post-doctoral qualification acquired abroad, Rachel understood that many Chinese expected that a man would only marry a woman with a lower educational level, but said that neither of them was bothered by it. Interestingly, however, both Wendy and Rachel felt it was important to explain and justify their choices in men to me, almost as a matter of habit.

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20 Interview ED 050531D.
21 Interview ED 050519.
I want an equal, democratic relationship with my partner

Sharon Liu expressed a clear preference for a relationship in which both parties were considered equals. Her emphasis was particularly on intellectual equality and respect for each other’s ideas. Married to another academic, she relished the ability to discuss and debate social and political issues with him. Rachel Chan, engaged and in her thirties, wanted equality, democracy, and independence within a relationship, but had reservations about being able to actually enact this:

I think in the family and out in society husbands and wives should be independent people – in their views, and also economically. Each should be able to make a living. This is absolutely necessary. It's different to the old ideas about relationships between wives and husbands. But this is hard to do. Well, it is easy enough to earn money, but to think independently, have your own thoughts and opinions, that's harder.

Many other highly educated women articulated a desire for economic and intellectual equality in their relationship, including Louise Hua, Teresa Chen, and Fiona Jia.22

Men won’t like me because of my high status

All of the highly educated women I interviewed knew of specific phrases deployed in the media and by the public that depicted them as unmarriageable. Almost all of the women mentioned such terms, like ‘the Third Sex’ and ‘Miejue Shi’tai’, of their own accord during the interviews. In a very small proportion of

22 Interviews ED 050607L, ED050421F and ED 050428 respectively.
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instances where they had not already raised it I did ask if they had heard of these sayings.

Over 80% of the highly educated interviewees said that they felt there was discrimination against high-achieving women when it came to dating and mate selection. Only a handful of these women, however, felt that this discourse had had a direct effect on their personal lives. Unsurprisingly, older married women within the group said that it had just not been an issue for them. However, for younger women who were single and studying when these sayings became particularly popular, the fear that their levels of professional or academic achievement might render them unacceptable to many potential suitors was common. Hannah Yao certainly felt that these views had a negative impact on her marriage chances, and it spurred her to explore a range of matchmaking options to enlarge the pool of potential suitors. Lucy Qin, a lively and articulate PhD student in management at one of China’s most prestigious universities, also shared this concern. She said, “If I get a PhD maybe men will think, ‘oh, she’s studied too much, I don’t like this kind of girlfriend… they are difficult to manage’. So maybe I won’t have a boyfriend or even a husband.”

Although only in her early twenties, she was making the effort to break from her single status and gain some experience in dating in order to make herself more marketable. Both Hannah and Lucy explained their continuous single state by appropriating the very discourse that spurred this dissertation research.

I don’t want to end up alone

Some of my highly educated interviewees expressed a fear of loneliness. Frequently, the effect of this was to encourage these women to marry. In fact,
when I asked my married interviewees what the best part of being married was, and asked my unmarried interviewees what they thought the best part of marriage would be, over three-quarters of them said ‘not being lonely’ or words to that effect.\(^{24}\)

A number of the single women did not personally feel that there was anything wrong with remaining single forever, but were nonetheless worried that society would brand them as ‘strange’ or ‘flawed’ if they did. Fear of being a ‘misfit’ in society, particularly as a result of being single, created an imperative to find a partner soon. Lisa Yang, a 28-year-old woman with a PhD in economics, observed:

> The other thing is that society is built around people being married. Most people are married in this society. So after a certain age, if you are not married your social group gets smaller and smaller. Single people still don’t really have a space in this society.\(^{25}\)

Lauren Lai, who was enrolled in a PhD in law, commented similarly:

> In China, for a woman, if you are not married then that’s a bit of a weird phenomenon, and you will never be able to get away from people’s endless gossip! Especially in the countryside and less developed places. Maybe this is softening a little, but marriage is still a very important thing for a woman.\(^{26}\)

Finally, a fear of loneliness also made some women more inclined to have children. Meredith Ye\(^{27}\), a married woman in her late 20s about to complete her PhD in anthropology, had yet to decide about children when I spoke to her. She said that she knew she could have a great life without them, but was afraid that

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\(^{24}\) For example interviews ED 050413F, ED 050519 and ED 050408.

\(^{25}\) Interview ED 050413.

\(^{26}\) Interview ED 050418.

\(^{27}\) Interview ED 050615 YM.
she might be lonely in her old age. So even though she thought that they cost a lot of time, energy, and money, overall she was still in favour of having one.

Practical and economic concerns

Practical and economic considerations have played a role in the personal decision-making of many of my highly educated interviewees. Such considerations included the realities of their income and expenditure; the availability of housing; transport and logistics; access to childcare; and time constraints. For Marlene Zhao, the cost of living influenced her decision-making about marriage. Marlene was 37 years old and had lectured in history for several years. When I first met her she was almost finished writing her PhD. On the question of whether she would ever marry, Marlene said,

I don’t really mind if I don’t marry. I mean... Well to me, to be married is better, but I could deal with either being married or not. The only thing is that in Beijing, to live as a single person is a bit hard. The cost of living is so expensive. For example, house prices are very very expensive. As a single person these costs are hard to bear.

On the other hand, a number of highly educated women remarked that they, like many other women, did not need a husband simply because of the economic support he could bring or the physical labour he could provide. Women such as Hannah Yao and Jane Lin commented on how in the market economy, as earners of a reasonable wage, they could easily purchase any of the services or labour for which a woman might have traditionally relied on a husband.

28 Interview ED 050415 ZYB.
Others felt that practical and economic considerations influenced them in other ways. Charlotte Wu was motivated to improve her material position while she was still young and when it was less likely to affect her personal life. Charlotte was 27 years of age when we first met. The daughter of a peasant family from far north China, Charlotte’s parents had not supported her studies beyond middle school, preferring instead that she finish as early as possible and find a job in the local area. Charlotte had always wanted to take her education as far as she could, in large part because she anticipated it would lift her out of poverty. She explained that one of the main reasons she had decided to do her PhD was the better conditions it would lead to:

In China, Bachelors and Masters and PhDs get different treatment from their work units. For example a Masters graduate gets an apartment with 2 rooms and a sitting room, but a PhD graduate gets an apartment with 3 rooms and a sitting room.

When initially making the decision to apply for a PhD program, Charlotte felt that it was a good time to do so as she was not too old and her long-term boyfriend was “not so old that he was in a hurry to get married.”

*The influence of others*

In some cases, important decisions were made by women either because their families demanded it or because the women wanted to please family members. We have already heard at some length the story of Jane Lin, who claimed that she married largely to satisfy her mother. Tanya Kang also went ahead with a marriage because of direct familial pressure. Today, she is a well-known
academic and commentator. When I met her she was 50 years old, and was married with a teenage son. Tanya had married late, particularly for her times. She was 31 years of age at the time, her husband 35. Tanya said that while neither she nor the man who became her husband were worried about being single at that age, both of their parents were very worried about the situation. At the time of the wedding the couple had only known each other for six months. The relationship had started a little rockily, and needed far more time to develop, but given the urgency felt by both sets of parents they decided to get married straight away. Although not yet married and without a boyfriend, 22-year-old Lucy Qin was already predicting that she would make significant personal life decisions in large part for her parents. She stated that marriage “is a kind of responsibility. I think they brought be me up and now I have to repay them. And marriage is the repayment. And to have a nice husband, and a nice happy family life, that will satisfy everybody.”

For many women, while their parents did not play a direct role in introducing them to a potential suitor, the approval of their boyfriend by their parents was still considered essential before the pair decided to get engaged. Charlotte Wu said of her fiancé: “my parents agreed to him being my husband 3 years ago. It’s just up to me now!”

For other highly educated women, it was not friends or family who had the greatest external influence on the trajectory of their personal lives, but broader political developments. Born in 1953 and 1954 respectively, academics Gwen Song and Robyn Yuan were both intensely affected by the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Gwen married late, after spending time after the Cultural Revolution catching up on the many years of education she had lost. Due to these delays she felt she did not have the chance to have children. Robyn similarly experienced delays in education and

29 Interview ED 050406.
30 Interview ED 050628 MH.
31 Interview ED 050628 LW.
a fracturing of her life, and felt that as a consequence of her experiences during this period in Chinese history she missed out on the chance to marry.

While it was not explicitly pointed to by any of the highly educated women, it appears that international exposure, particularly living abroad, might have had an influence on their romantic desires and decision-making. Within the highly educated group, five women had lived abroad. All of these women were 37 years of age or older, and only one was currently married with a child, which is clearly the norm for urban women of their age.\footnote{The remaining four women were married with no children, divorced with no children, or single.}

**Conceptions of the model mate**

Most of the highly educated women I spoke to readily provided information about their conception of the ideal partner, husband, or mate. Both married and unmarried women indicated criteria that they considered ideal in a partner, and several of the married women also commented on how their husbands compared against these criteria. In tallying this information, my approach was to first record the key words and phrases used by each woman. If another woman used one of these *exact* terms in her own description of an ideal partner, I recorded this together with the reference made by the previous interviewee. In this process I was conscious not to artificially force criteria together by grouping terms I personally considered might be analogous. I wanted these women to speak for themselves, and since in many instances the specific meanings and usage behind the words they used was not always provided, I felt it was better to retain many somewhat similar-sounding criteria separately rather than seek to reduce them to a more manageable number.
While there were some exact terms that were put forward as top mate preference criteria by multiple women, many terms were mentioned by only one woman within the interview sample. Using this approach, the top three criteria put forward by my highly educated cohort were ‘responsible’, ‘caring and kind’, and ‘values family’, three criteria which were mentioned by equal numbers of highly educated women. Other particularly popular traits were intelligence and demonstrated concern for family members.

At an overall thematic level, the highly educated women painted a picture of an ideal man who was aware of his obligations to the broader family network and who met these obligations. Being responsible, valuing family, looking after those around him, being of a good family background and having a stable income all pointed in this direction, as did a number of other lesser ranked criteria. Sharon Liu said that her ideal partner was “one who takes responsibility for his wife and child; really loves his family…. As for other things, relatively successful at work, that will do.” For Fiona Jia, “the most important thing is that we understand each other, care about each other, basically that. I don’t want him to be too ambitious, because if he is he will always put the home second, since work will consume most of his energy and spirit.”33 Vanessa Peng, alongside others, was concerned that the man she ended up with should love her family, not just her.34

These women also wanted their boyfriend or husband to be someone they genuinely got along with – perhaps someone with whom they shared hobbies. The women were not especially ambitious in the kinds of personality features a potential partner might have, but they certainly did want an amiable match. For Charlotte Wu, it would be sufficient for her partner to be “a little interesting. We

33 Interview ED 050428W.
34 Interview ED 050420.
should be able to communicate our views.” For others, like Nancy Zheng and Vanessa Peng, sharing a love of sports would be ideal. Lisa Yang showed more layered thinking:

Well, the first thing is that we tend to look for people about the same age. So when you ask about marrying people below you educationally it is more a question of age. For example we are all born in the 1970s. But Bachelors students mostly are all born in the 1980s. We want men who are about the same age or maybe a little older. ... The second thing is we want people with common ground, common experiences. Someone who speaks the same language. I think mostly people marrying people of the same educational background is just a situational thing. Between workers and students there just isn’t a common language.

Lisa also captured the feelings expressed by many of her highly educated sisters when she said “being married is better than being single. When you face difficulties or burdens, life is easier when you can share them.” In short, the criteria articulated by my highly educated interviewees suggested that they most wanted a good family man and a companion with whom they could travel through life together: someone with whom they could share both burdens and interests.

35 Interviews ED 050426N and ED 050420 respectively.
36 Interview ED 050413.
37 Interview ED 050413.
38 This model appears to accord with an emphasis on comfort or attachment love over sexual desire and passionate love. See William R. Jankowiak (ed.), *Intimacies: Love and Sex across Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) for discussions of the balance between these three forces in a range of societies and cultures.
Conclusion

Although less than half of my highly educated interviewees were married, over 70% were in relationships, and almost all expressed a desire to marry if they had not done so already. One of the factors underpinning this desire was the commonly-held understanding that true and complete womanhood is not achieved until one is a wife and a mother. This view of womanhood has a long history in China, and was discussed in some detail in Chapter 3. In addition, many of the highly educated women understood themselves as being deeply embedded in a web of personal relationships and obligations. While many women indicated that they felt they had an obligation to themselves to live life as they felt appropriate, this was constrained by their sense of obligation to others, which informed both their ability to conceive of possibilities for their own personal lives beyond more conventional options and their ability to realise these possibilities.

Many of the highly educated women faced pressures exerted either directly or indirectly by family members. As the women invested more and more time in their education and towards their career, parents worried about when their daughters would finally settle down to a family life and provide them with longed-for grandchildren. While most interviewees were able to resist these pressures in the short term, this parental concern did have an impact. In addition, some of these highly educated women felt compelled to marry due to their own fears of loneliness, their desires to not be social misfits, and an awareness of the financial difficulties inherent in a single life. In a world where marriage was the norm and adult life operated around this fact, remaining single in perpetuity seemed an uncomfortable prospect. Thus, while marriage often occurred later among highly educated women, it normally did occur. Only
two of the highly educated women I interviewed whom were older than 35 had never been married.

The delays in marriage were in part due to the women's perception that marriage would conflict with other things that they wished to achieve. Many of them had put marriage on the backburner – not to mention other personal life milestones they wished to reach – as they committed themselves to their studies. “After graduation” was a common response to my enquiries about whether they thought they would get married, have children, and so on. For a small number of women, the inability to find a partner who met their mate preference ideals until later in life was also a factor in the delay. As single 37-year-old Marlene Zhao poignantly put it, “if in the end I don’t get married, this will not have been a choice as such, it would have been that I just didn’t find anyone suitable for me.”

In seeking to explain their lives and frame their identities, the highly educated women most commonly situated themselves against the framework of the ‘normal’ woman. They claimed they were no different to other women, having the same basic goals in their lives and sharing the same responsibilities to family members that others had. At times the highly educated interviewees adopted alternative subject positions, such as that of the learned, independent woman who demanded equality in her relationships or who made decisions because they were what she and she alone thought best. However, as their personal lives most closely resembled that prescribed by mainstream gender and family norms, with some delays in reaching key milestones like marriage, it would appear that the identification these women claimed with the ‘normal’ woman label was powerful in shaping their personal lives.
This chapter will explore desires and decision-making in the personal lives of the high-income women I interviewed. There were 35 such women, aged between 21 and 45, with an average age of approximately 30 years. All of these women earned over 5,000 RMB per month at the time I first interviewed them, some several times that amount. They were largely employed in private enterprise, in fields such as media, information technology, finance, and law. The vast majority of these women also had a relatively high level of education, although less so than those women I have classified in this dissertation as ‘highly educated’. The high-income women generally had a tertiary education, whether it be a diploma, a Bachelors degree, or a Masters degree. Many of them also had some experience living overseas. Most spoke English comfortably, often using the language daily within a work context or socially with foreign friends. They frequently engaged with those features of social life that are common among wealthy young professionals in other nations, such as socialising at expensive bars, yoga classes, gym work-outs, shopping, and domestic and international travel.

The stories of several selected women, told below, highlight some of the trends and features evident across the romantic lives of the high-income portion of my sample more broadly. In examining how and why these features developed I
will employ the same framework applied to highly educated women in the previous chapter. The values, hopes, and fears of these women will be explored, as well as their understandings of self, and the elements of both choice and chance in their telling of their lives.

High-income women: selected stories

Penny Ang — contemplating doing it all on her own

Penny Ang was the first woman I interviewed in the high-income group. Unlike my interviews with women in the highly educated group, we did not meet on a campus or at a workplace.¹ Instead, Penny suggested that we meet at the Starbucks store at Beijing’s upmarket World Trade Centre. At the time of the first interview in May 2005, Penny was 33. She was born in Sichuan province in 1972.

Penny runs a business which facilitates educational exchanges. She did an MBA in Wales, and while living there a number of British universities tried to get her involved in their China offices. After she finished her MBA in 2002 she took up roles of this type in Beijing for a short period, and then decided it was “better to run my own business.” The business she started became quite successful. She has ten staff, and the business has ensured her a good income and many opportunities for international travel.

Penny had just rejected an offer from a university in England to do her PhD there. She wanted to accept it, but could not see how she could manage. She

¹ Interview WC 050520.

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indicated there was another possibility in the pipeline – with another university in the UK – and that it might be more suitable as the offer was for part-time studies: “I think if I can do my research and run my business at the same time that will be much better for me.” In speaking about her motivation to do her PhD, her sense of personal vision and determination became clear. She said, “frankly speaking, my dream is to be a teacher or lecturer or even professor at a good university and also to have my own consultancy company.”

Penny said she was “Single. Totally single.” She did not have a boyfriend at present, but had dated in the past: “Yes. I have an ex-bf.” When Penny spoke she used the English abbreviation, and looked a bit coy as she said it. I asked Penny if she wanted to be in a relationship. She said “I am open to that”, but also said she had previously had a bad experience in a relationship, where there was a lack of trust and honesty, and that she was still upset by it. She indicated that this experience affected her current thinking on men. In her view a relationship needed to be with someone she could trust and be vulnerable with, and who could be vulnerable with her, and at present she was not entirely confident that that could be found.

On the issue of when Penny might ideally like to get married and have children, she made an interesting reference to the American sitcom ‘Sex and the City’:

Actually I realised the question of timing in ‘Sex and the City’. Because Carrie in that show said ‘it’s all about timing’. So I think I have to think it over. But I cannot sacrifice my standards just to meet the right timing. I am well prepared to survive by myself. But maybe my parents are not that prepared.

Penny said that she felt pressure from her parents, especially her mother, to have children. Her mother was a headmaster and loved children and wanted
more around, “so in that sense I feel a bit guilty.” Penny herself was sure she wanted a family: “Sure. In that sense I am old-fashioned.” She confessed that in fact she probably wanted a child more than she wanted a husband. Hinting at the idea of being able to get the former without the latter, Penny said, “But you know it’s illegal in China. So hey, I could move to Canada...” While she initially claimed that she was just joking, Penny came back to the topic of having children without a husband when I later asked if she thought there were any special challenges or issues she might face due to her higher education or income. She replied, “There is one pressure which gets bigger and bigger”, and clearly expected me to automatically know what she meant. I put forward “family?” . She countered:

Well, family is not a big issue for me because I can…. I can manage by myself. But it is about children. Funny but it’s true. Now I am trying to put a kind of joke out among my friends. Trying within this small environment to let them understand I am not that strange, but it is possible I might do without another part of the family [i.e., the husband] if I cannot find a proper one.

I asked her, “so you’d just do it by yourself?” She said, “Yes, we are women, right? We can do without men. That is depending on yourself.” I confirmed, “be a single mother?” Penny replied, “I am thinking, I am thinking. It would be a shame. I don’t think I will take that idea totally seriously, but I am thinking.” In short, this was not her ideal situation by any means, but it was a situation not entirely off the cards. She said she had friends who only thought about the situation when it was already too late – and she did not want to be one of those people. She found it strange that she knew “some young couples who don’t want to have any children at all.”
I asked Penny if she found it difficult meeting men in the course of her day. She replied: “Well, first I should say there are a lot of men. But if we are talking about suitable men it is kind of difficult for me.” I asked why she thought this was so difficult, and she said “I don’t have much time in one place. I come, I go...” I said to Penny that in China being single seems to be becoming a little more popular, a little more fashionable. I wanted to know if she thought this was so. Penny said, “A little. Just a little. In big cities I should say. It is understandable but not acceptable in smaller places.” Penny still harbours a hope that a suitable man will come along and she will be able to fulfil her “traditional” (her choice of word) dream of having a family.

Penny thinks a woman being “self-reliant” is highly important. She had developed strong views on what a woman should be, and jokingly asked how long I could put up with her speaking on the issue. By way of summary, she said,

For me there are different kinds of lifestyles a woman can put herself in. To be good company for a man is very important. And at the same time to be a mother, a daughter, right? But if she cannot find that kind of lifestyle, there are also lots of other things she can go after. To be open minded, to be self-reliant, always willing to give other people a hand – but not that naïve. And always keep a smile. Right. And to have her own reason to stay calm all the time. And also to be brave. To do anything she thinks is right. That’s all. It’s nothing to do with degrees [education]. If we are lucky enough, we can enjoy sports or art or the sea or blue sky.
Jean Xue — It’s my life

When I met 38-year-old Jean Xue in February 2006, she was the China Managing Director of a major American investment banking and financial group. After trying unsuccessfully for several months to meet, Jean finally found a window of time between business appointments. We met in the Hilton Beijing piano bar for coffee and a chat. Jean explained that despite her hectic schedule — travelling around major Chinese centres every week, and overseas every few weeks — she was always keen to have the opportunity to explain her views of China to interested foreigners.

Jean gained a Masters in Law in Beijing, and a second LLM in the United States. After graduation she worked for many years as a lawyer for the Chinese Government before moving into private enterprise. Jean said she really enjoyed her work; she felt that the development of her career in such a positive way had been in part due to luck, and in part due to making sure she made her own decisions about her life. This combination of both choice and chance was clearly conveyed in her narrative, with statements such as,

I think the reason why I enjoy it so much is that I know that I decide what I want. I mean this is very important for women. I took this position, I made this choice, and that’s very important for me. And I’m very lucky. I mean, there are so many people like me but they are not as lucky as I am. Somehow I met the right person and I chose the right career, and so many people were kind to me and that allowed me to get promotions, get all kinds of opportunities.

Jean said that if she was going to give any advice to young women today, she would tell them “what makes women happy is making their own choices.”

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2 Interview WC 060206.
Jean's husband lived and worked in Beijing. He was a US citizen of recent mainland Chinese descent. They had met in 1995 while she was studying in the US, married in 1996, and then the two of them settled in China. In the US her husband had worked as a successful lawyer in a major American firm, and now ran his own firm in Beijing. The couple had no children. Jean said, “Not yet. That’s one of the big challenges I am facing at my age.” She wanted to have children, but maybe the following year, when it was the Year of the Pig according to Chinese astrology.

When I wanted to have a child my health was not very good. That was in the late 1990s… Like 1999 or 2000. But when I became stronger, as my physical condition improved, I started to get really busy again. To be honest, though, it’s probably really because I am scared of having a child. Because, well, it’s such a big responsibility, there’s so much pressure. It totally changes your whole life. So I’m a little bit scared to have a child – I think I myself am a child. I have not grown up yet. I’m not mature enough yet. But my husband is very generous. He’s very kind and supports me in whatever I want… We started thinking about it and thought that since I am getting kind of old we should think about it seriously. And we decided to have a kid. So, we’ll see….

Jean said that no-one she knew believed that she could give up work, even for a while, to become a mother. According to her they say “no, your contribution is to society not to the family!” She expressed concern that so many women like herself and her friends were either putting off having children until they were a bit older, or deciding not to have them at all:

It’s a social problem for the country. Because people like me – very well-educated, maybe a bit older, and you know, living a very good life – they rarely want to have children. I think it’s becoming a problem.
She also took issue with the fact that many of these women were not even getting married:

The positive side is that along with the development of society, women have more power or freedom to make their own choices. About marriage, about having kids. But there is a downside. It’s a cultural thing. Women are still women. And the traditional role of women is having a family, having kids, and supporting their husband. So high-status women are facing a very big challenge right now. On the one hand they have to fulfil their social responsibility, on the other hand they have to balance the difficulties or conflicts incurred by having families, of playing their traditional role. I think that’s one of the reasons why more and more high-status women choose to be single. Or to divorce. Because it’s really hard for a human being to balance all these things well. To give you an example – I am actually a member of a kind of CEO club. We often hang around together and talk about social issues or family problems… And when I was in Shenzhen, there were maybe 11 members in the club, and only two women, including me. The other woman was older than me, but she was divorced, and she didn’t have any kids. But, she seemed to be very happy. She said it was her choice. She could be living another life if she wanted to. So I mean that’s very good. …. It’s a kind of trade-off. You do what you want and you are going to pay the cost.

In terms of choosing a partner, Jean commented that,

When I married my husband he was just starting out as a lawyer, and he had huge student loans to repay. But I believed in our potential. But I can understand what the new generation thinks, the way they think about it. Money is a very important factor. It is probably the most important factor in terms of influencing the stability of the family. So when the new generation, especially young girls, want to marry a rich man or a millionaire or something like that, I think it’s understandable. I mean, it works. If the husband earns more than the
wife, normally the family is very stable. … Even high-status women like me, I personally still have those kinds of thoughts. I think my husband should be better than me. I think it’s understandable. And most of the time it works. But you cannot marry a man just for money.

Jean’s personal income was 1.5 million RMB per year after tax. That figure did not include the rather substantial bonuses those in her position receive as a matter of course. It was likely her take-home income was well in excess of 2 million RMB per annum. I was curious as to what this meant in terms of her own marriage, given her comments about wanting a man who was “better” than her. She said, “his income is higher than mine”. She was not sure of the exact figure, but guessed that it might be about twice hers. She said “he has paid for everything – the house, the ongoing family expenses. I just use my salary for doing whatever I want.”

Mary Zhou – carving her own path

When Mary and I first met in July 2005, what was to be a brief introductory chat continued through lunch and lasted well into the afternoon.³ Mary, 39 years old at the time, was an energised woman who had plenty to say. She held a senior position in the media arm of a major international non-governmental organisation (NGO). She had only recently started in that role, having spent fourteen years first in the state media and then international corporate public relations. Mary had a Masters degree in Journalism.

Mary was happy at her new job: “Very busy, busier than before, but happy.” She took a pay cut of 33% in the switch, and said “It’s a little tough. Because I

³ Interview WC 051718.
am a single mother with a daughter in Grade 4”, and she was also trying to pay off her house.

Mary had divorced her husband in 2002, after 13 years of marriage. She said,

   The first reason was that he worked for the government, and had conservative views. But I worked in a foreign enterprise, which is rather liberal. So in outlook and in taste, our lifestyle just was not the same. We drifted further and further apart until it was just unbearable. The second thing – the sex life was also an issue. Women after 30 have high requirements… Third, his parents are peasants, with traditional, chauvinistic views. So they looked down on me as the wife, the daughter-in-law.

She said she was forced to live with them for eight years and to wait on them hand and foot during this time. Even though she was unhappy with her husband, she was worried about initiating divorce, in large part because of how it might affect him:

   The process of thinking [about divorce] was very tough. Within the government it is hard to get promotions and so on if you are divorced – people think maybe you are not such a good man, not responsible. So that was a lot of pressure on me… But I think I have done the right thing [by him] – he has remarried already…

Note the interesting consonance between her remarks and those of Jane Lin, who said in the previous chapter that she had only ever really felt release from her ex-husband and the feelings she had about divorcing him after he married again. Unlike Jane, however, Mary had a child, and she explained that she was worried about what effect divorce would have on her daughter. She said that her daughter was now doing okay, in part thanks to a number of popular new
TV shows, including children’s shows, where split families were portrayed and normalised. Mary said that she had “a lot of divorced friends. Women are more and more independent. It’s mostly women who initiate divorce. It’s more possible now they have economic independence.” She thought that seeing more people who were divorced helped her daughter to be more comfortable with the situation.

Mary was certain she would marry again: “I will. I have a boyfriend now. He lives with me and my daughter… It’s a bit awkward sometimes. I don’t want the two men to run into each other.” Mary’s boyfriend was unemployed, and spent most of his time practicing snooker with a view to one day becoming a professional player. He had not gone to university, whereas she had completed one Masters degree and had done most of another. Mary claimed that she herself did not care but acknowledged that others did. They had been together for five years, and had lived together for most of that time, but Mary still had never taken him back to her home town as she was worried about what her classmates would say. Her parents’ opinion was not an issue as both had passed away. Mary reflected that she had made a lot of decisions that might seem strange to others, but they were right for her. She said,

I’m different to others in my behaviour: I’ve gone from a high income to a lower income; I’ve gone from being married to a man who is a division director and very high up, with money and status and a lot of ‘invisible income’ (but who I couldn’t stand) to a boyfriend with no income, no status, no education. I know it seems as if there is no logic to it, but it goes according to my views…

Mary saw the public position of women in China as admirable when compared with international standards. In light of this, I asked if she thought it was difficult
for highly educated or high-status women to get married these days in China. She said she thought that this was probably the case:

Just look at Wu Yi [then Vice Premier of China]; she’s not married. I haven’t actually looked into it. I don’t want to believe it’s true. But if women are very strong, then men need either to be more tolerant, with a low profile like mine – a low salary, not in some kind of high-profile job, or they need to be extremely strong themselves. But if both are that strong, it’s probably going to be exhausting. Most men think that if a woman earns too much… Well, men mind. There are two exceptions – one is men who have a lot of self-confidence. The other is the dependent type, especially younger men.

Mary had multiple future goals, many of which were rather ambitious. She said “in work I want to make the media work of [my organisation] the best media work of all the NGOs… And I want to have another child… And do a PhD!” She felt that these goals would involve overcoming many challenges:

One is having a child. I’m a bit old. I’m 40 in October. So one problem is that I’m older. The other is economic – I’ll have to stay at home, with no salary, for a while…. And to do my PhD will be a challenge. Especially while bringing up a child. But maybe my daughter and I can go to university at the same time. Of course this will be even harder if I have another child…

Cherie Cao – quality of life

Cherie Cao was the China head of public relations and communications for a major international television channel. At the time of first interview, she was 30.⁴ In her twenties she had worked for a British consultancy company on

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⁴ Interview WC 060120.
projects in the international telecom and media industry, had worked for
another commercial television channel, and had completed a Masters in
International Public Relations abroad. In her current role, Cherie earned
approximately 38,000 RMB per month, plus annual bonuses. She said “I am
very happy, with my job and with my life.”

When we first met, Cherie had been dating, for about six months, a 43-year-old
man who worked in the same industry. I asked if Cherie had found it difficult
managing a busy work life with a personal life. Cherie had clearly given this
issue some thought, and responded at length:

When I first started working for [this company] about 3 years ago, I found it was
a little bit difficult. I spent too much time on work, because I was a newcomer to
the company. There were a lot of things I had to learn and meanwhile there
were tons of pressures from work and I had to balance them. It was not easy
for me. I had a hard time that first year. But last year the promise I made to
myself was to enjoy life as much as I can. So from last year, when I turned 30, I
said ‘okay, I have spent so much time on work, on study, from 20 to 30. Now
that I’m 30 years old I want to enjoy life more than work’. My family, and my
friends, and my colleagues, they all noticed the change... So I think now I
balance my work and life quite well.

I asked Cherie what prompted her to make that sort of change in her life. She
replied, rather earnestly,

I wanted to be nice to myself. I think because studying in the UK changed my
mind, [changed] the philosophy of my life. I talked to a lot of British people,
Westerners, Europeans. I noticed that they pursued a ‘quality of life’ that I had
just ignored before. I just always worked hard, studied hard – but for what? And
I came to understand that quality of life is more important than other things –
than money, or career, or success. So I think studying in the UK changed my attitude to life a lot. Another reason why I changed was that when I reached 30 years of age I’d gained some experience in terms of work and education. So I had earned the right to choose my own life. In my early 20s I had to wait for companies to choose me. I didn’t have that many options. But now I’ve got more choice. If a company wants me, they can ask for me, and if I don’t want the job, I can say no.

I wondered what kind of things she did now to enjoy her non-work life more. She said she enjoyed spending time at home alone after work, and tried to make sure she did not have business appointments every night. She had dinner with friends, went to the movies, went shopping, went to the gym, had beauty treatments, home decorated, and tried to catch up with her boyfriend for at least half a day each week. Spending time with her family was also a necessary part of her routine:

On the weekends, because I live alone, I have to spend half a day with my parents. My parents live in Beijing so I should see them every week. Spend half a day with my parents, my brother, my sister-in-law and my 8 year-old niece. I love them. So we must spend some time together, do some family things every week – if I don’t travel to another city.

Cherie spoke positively of her new life balance, and I asked if she thought her experience was representative of other high-status women in Beijing. Cherie paused and said, articulating the idea of trade-offs in life,

I think I have told you all the good sides of my life. I am happy. And I am very proud to work where I do. But my personal life has had hard times, to be honest. I don’t know why, but I just never meet my Mr. Right. So I’ve only dated on and off, and sometimes I’ve felt very low. Most of my girlfriends have got
married and settled down, but I'm not one of them so far. Still I’m dating someone and I’m trying hard, because it’s not easy to meet someone. You know Chinese guys think I’m too tough and aggressive, or too successful. This is my disadvantage. And I studied abroad, I travel a lot, and I’ve got a lot of friends – Chinese and foreigners… I’m independent; this really scares them. I’m too independent for them to handle my life. So that's...that's something that a little bit bothers me, I have to say. That's my wish for this year – I wish I could settle down. It doesn't mean get married, just get into a very stable relationship… I don't want to have all the unstable moments in my heart if you know what I mean. But then my friends they always have problems. I think most of them have problems with their careers. They don't have a very stable job or... or otherwise they have problems with their partners, with their husbands. You know life is not perfect. Some people think because I am too successful in my career, so that’s why on balance I am not successful in my personal life. I mean, fair enough, I don't complain. I never complain about that.

Cherie was clear that she really wanted to get married and have children. She said,

Definitely. I’m a very traditional Chinese woman although I don’t look like that. People think I am too Western-style. I say oh no, I am Chinese, traditional. I love kids... So for the sake of kids, I have to get married. Sometimes I think – do I need a man? I think because I love kids I will get married, that’s for sure. I wish I could have kids before 35, another four and a half years to go. That means definitely I have to get married before that, and then I have to have kids.

I asked what she looked for in a man:

Well, chemistry first. I think a man is very sexy when they focus on their work. I am very attracted to a man who has a good career – that doesn’t mean he has to be extremely successful but he has to be serious about his work and have
potential. And I like a smart person with a sense of humour. And considerate. And who loves family life, which is very important for me.

Cherie had no particular aesthetic requirements, or material ones: “I don’t need someone to support my life”. On this, she said,

My friends think I am too idealistic about life. I think they are more realistic, not like me. So they definitely think a man who has a good financial background has a good base for marriage. Because later women will have kids, and if a man can support his wife and kids, then life is going to be great. But for me I think if his level is similar to my level, that’s perfect. If he earns more than me, it’s … a surprise! And a plus….. [smiles]. But this is not a qualification for me to consider someone.

Cherie says since she turned 30, she has been getting a lot of pressure from her friends to marry. She said her parents, however, have been okay. She told them some time ago that,

It’s a fact that I will not get married as my other girlfriends – getting married early, or around 25 or 26, have kids before 30. I walk another path. I’m not saying mine is the wrong track but from normal people’s point of view maybe it is. But that’s my life. So I have told my parents that if I want to marry someone I will bring him home for your agreement. Before that, don’t ask me anything about it, don’t give me any pressure. My parents are very open-minded, and they agree with me that if I get too stressed I will get married to anyone and then I will have an unhappy life. That’s not something you wish for. So they accept it. But I can tell they still worry about me.

I asked Cherie if she wished to live abroad again, and she replied that she would really like to stay in Beijing – it is her home town, and she loves it. Her parents are in Beijing, they are getting older, and as Cherie explained,
according to Chinese culture she should not move away from her parents in their later years. She said the only reason she might move is if she marries a man who has to move somewhere else. She considered herself to be, “as a woman”, the one of the pair who should compromise if that issue arose.

When thinking about her future, family was clearly at the centre. Cherie said,

I want to work where I work for as long as I can. For probably another 3 years I think. Because so far I think I haven’t seen another foreign media company in Beijing that is better than this one. And before I’m 33 I hope I can get married, and have a baby. The first kid before 35. And then I will focus more time on family life and personal life instead of work, working overtime less.

Cherie wanted to have two children if she could, and considered going abroad to do so.

**Romantic circumstances of the high-income group**

The 35 high-income women whom I interviewed fit into a broad range of categories in terms of their current romantic position or marital status. The four women whose personal stories I have related represent the major romantic statuses: single, such as Penny; dating, such as Cherie; married, such as Jean; and divorced, such as Mary. Mary also fit into the cohabiting category, as she was living with her new partner. Cohabitation is one aspect of the high-income relationships scene that is relatively common. Most of the married women of this group had lived with their husbands before marriage. Furthermore, most of the single women and women with boyfriends were of the opinion that it was
convenient, nothing to be too concerned about, and rather sensible to do before finally tying the knot.

Divorce was more common in the high-income sample than the highly educated sample. Clearly, both samples are small, so the significance of this difference is limited. However, it is worth noting that a great many of my high-income interviewees, including those who were never married or remained in their first marriage, mentioned having many friends who were divorced. This was not the case among the highly educated women I interviewed. The interviewees in the high-income group who were divorced all had children and all had primary custody of these children – either arrived at formally through the courts or informally between the ex-spouses. This stands in contrast with the tradition of orphans or children of failed relationships being claimed by their father's family – a manifestation of patrilineal tendencies within Chinese culture.5

**Decision-making among high-income women**

What factors did the four women suggest most affected their romantic and personal life paths? For Penny Ang, the desire to be ‘self-reliant’ and not depend on or require the help of others was strong. This desire was born out of both her life experience and personality, and influenced many of her life decisions. The strong desire to have children also looked likely to impact upon her future life course – as discussed, this desire would not necessarily drive her to marry, but might encourage her to attempt single motherhood.

5 The importance of the patriline is discussed in Chapter 2.
In the case of Jean Xue, the dominant factor she put forward in terms of her personal life decision-making was the importance of what she believed would make her, as an individual, happiest. Although possessed of what appeared to be a genuine concern for her husband, she believed that trying to do something just to please someone else would not make anyone happy – so there was no point. Jean derived a great deal of pride from her professional success, and fulfilling her desires in this realm often took precedence over family-based desires.

Mary Zhou’s narrative similarly was characterised by a sense of doing what she felt was most fitting for her, rather than doing what others thought she should do or what convention might suggest was appropriate. In contrast to Jean Xue, however, Mary’s personal narrative was influenced by a particular concern with spiritual and personal happiness. Although professionally successful, she did not place much importance on prestige, status, or financial position. Her divorcing of her first husband is an example of this. Mary also expressed concern about the impact of her decisions on others, explaining this as the reason for the delay in this divorce – she was concerned for both her husband and her child.

Cherie Cao emphasised ‘quality of life’ as one of the key principles in her life at that time. The importance of family – current and prospective – was also clear. Cherie was cognisant of the fact that life was full of trade-offs, and one cannot always get everything one wants, exactly when one wants it.

One of the interesting things about all four of these high-income women was the way in which they shifted readily between a ‘modern independent woman’ subject position and a ‘traditional woman’ subject position in their personal narratives. These women spoke confidently about their independence and
sense of self-sufficiency. They felt able to support themselves economically – and others too if need be – and also felt a sense of personal capability derived from their achievements at work. Yet they were quick to claim that they were “traditional” women who wanted families (that is, if the right time and preferably the right person could be found). In some cases these women consciously juxtaposed these roles. In the case of Cherie Cao, she paired success in the former with failure in the latter. It was all well and good to talk about the good side of her life, Cherie said, but that was just one side.6

How representative was this of the other high-income women I interviewed? What other factors did these women point to as a way of explaining their personal life trajectory, and what other interpretative repertoires or subject positions did they invoke in their narratives?

Desires, fears, and understandings

I am a person who can handle things on my own

One question I had about the self-conceptions of the women I interviewed was “did they see themselves as high-status women?” In relation to this, it is interesting to note that while not many highly educated women saw themselves as truly being of ‘high status’, over 80% of the high-income women understood why they might be viewed as such and felt comfortable with this label. Perhaps this was in part due to the rise of consumerism and materialism in Chinese society, linked to the growing opening of China’s cities to global capitalism,

6 It is interesting to note that a number of the interviewees in the study on British singles conducted by Reynolds et. al. told their stories in a similar manner – speaking of the good sides of their life quite confidently, then suddenly becoming apologetic when it came to their singleness. Reynolds et. al. situate this narrative pattern in the context of singleness being seen as a ‘deficit identity’, i.e. one that is lacking and requires justification. See Jill Reynolds, Margaret Wetherell, and Stephanie Taylor, ‘Choice and Chance: Negotiating Agency in Narratives of Singleness’, *The Sociological Review*, 55/2 (2007), pp. 331-51.
which fuelled an increased emphasis on forms of status derived from wealth and consumption.

In general, knowing that they were professionally and economically successful had its greatest impact in supporting the view – held by almost all of my high-income interviewees – that they were women who could manage perfectly well on their own. Perhaps the clearest indication of how such self-belief potentially affected their personal life courses was the faith a number of women in their ability to raise a child by themselves. This faith showed itself in the lives of both Elizabeth Ren and Mary Zhou, two highly successful professional women. Elizabeth Ren was 42 years of age when I first met her. She worked for one of the world’s largest law firms, and she was based in Beijing. She had been divorced for seven years, after seven years of marriage. Elizabeth had an 11-year-old daughter, of whom she had primary custody. When Elizabeth spoke of her divorce, she said, “I wasn’t that sad in my marriage. My spirits were just… low. But I knew I could raise my daughter by myself. If I wasn’t sure that I could, I don’t think I would have done it.”

Mary Zhou spoke very similarly about how her confidence in her ability to manage on her own, underpinned by her sound economic independence, made it easier for her to divorce her first husband and raise her daughter on her own. Yet other high-income women, as we will see below, were considering having a child without a partner, something they felt they could manage.

Looked at from a statistical perspective, eight women within the high-income group regularly earned 20,000 or more RMB per month. One of these women was aged 21; the remainder were 29 to 42 years of age. Only one of these women was officially married and had a child, which is clearly the norm for urban Chinese women of this age range. However even this woman had been
separated from her husband for many years. This sort of evidence suggests that a high income, and with it a strong sense of personal capability, has a definite effect on the likelihood that a woman will have a non-normative personal life course.

*I am the one who knows who is best for me*

As with the highly educated women, the position that these women knew what was best for them, even when others clearly thought otherwise, surfaced particularly in relation to their choice of partner. An example of this is Mary Zhou when she divorced her first husband.\(^7\) This man was, from an outsider’s view, a good catch. He was a senior government official, well-educated, and of good family standing. Yet Mary chose to end this relationship in her mid 30s, and was now living with a man who had no job, no formal qualifications, no connections, and no fortune. But Mary felt that only she knew what was important to her in a partner and only she should make this choice. Mary was not alone in this thinking. Bianca Jing\(^8\) was uninfluenced by conventions about age differences between partners. At the age of 30 she had married a man seven years her junior. Lynette Ge, similarly, was engaged to a man several years younger than her, and remarked that this was the case for quite a few of her friends.

*I want to maintain my freedom and independence*

Eleven of the high-income women I spoke with emphasised their desire for freedom and independence. These desires were particularly prevalent among

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\(^7\) Interview WC 050718.  
\(^8\) Interview WC 051201.
the younger interviewees. Christy Liang was one of the women under 30 years of age who articulated the influence this had on her approach to her life:

In the modern world, women should be independent. And women should know more about themselves by themselves, not just echo what men say. Right now what men say is more powerful than what women say. So women are affected by this; they are influenced by men’s views. But you should know your own desires, own physical needs – this is not something that is dirty or something created by males... I believe women should work and live economically independently. If you don’t have economic independence you can’t have your own personality. Maybe this is a kind of Marxism!! [Christy laughs]. But you have to work or you will be controlled by your husband.  

A number of women over 30 years of age commented on how the experience of pursuing independence and their own personal desires had directly impacted upon their personal lives. For example, Jean Xue had conflicting emotions. On the one hand, she expressed regret, and put forward a possible plan to change her approach to life and her marriage:

I am lucky enough to have a very nice husband – he often says that the happiness he is able to give me is to allow me to make my own choices... I think compared with him I am kind of selfish... Actually I think I have always tried my best to balance and I have tried my best to spend as much time as I can with him and with my family. But still I think the time we have spent together [since they got married over ten years ago] is less than the time we have spent apart. So that’s a very big problem. I don’t think I can live this life too long. So that’s why I’ve decided to have a baby next year.

On the other hand, later in the same interview she quite firmly reiterated the worth of maintaining the freedom to do as she desired:

9 Interview WC 050715.
I’m very satisfied with the life I am living. So if I am a kind of ‘successful’ case then I think that there are lessons I’ve learned and experiences I’ve had that I want to share with young women… Like what makes women happy is making their own choices. …And I’ve really got lessons. In 1998, when my husband was working in Hong Kong at a law firm, a very prestigious US law firm, I wanted to compromise. I had two choices – choose my family life or choose my work life. My work life should be in Beijing, but my family life should be in Hong Kong. So I compromised – I went to Shenzhen. It’s very close to Hong Kong, so I could see my husband very often. But I was not happy. Because I didn’t see my value, my worth. Because of my unhappiness I lost my temper almost every day and I yelled at my husband and I was not satisfied with my situation and it was like a nightmare to me. Eventually we had a talk, and my husband realised that it wasn’t working. So I returned to Beijing and took my old job back. And afterwards, after that, things changed and I think started getting much better. So I think that’s a lesson – according to my past experience women should do whatever it is they want. Of course you have to convince others. I mean, you have to communicate with others – your family – and tell them. You shouldn’t be entirely selfish, and only think about yourself. But I believe there is a balance point, a balance spot, which you can figure out.

Overall, women both over and under 30 years of age within the high-income group expressed that independence in particular was important to them. At the early stages of their working lives, carving out their own path was perhaps understandably a common goal. And for women who had more life experience, that experience appeared to reiterate the value of being able, and willing, to stand on one’s own two feet.
I value my career, and I am willing to put it first for a little while

Based on the observable life courses of these high-income women, one could easily argue that most of them placed significant value on their careers and were willing to delay some personal life goals until their career allowed it. Many of these women explained their circumstances in such a way. Interestingly, the issue arose more around having children than around marriage. Raising children, these women clearly reasoned, required massive amounts of time and energy. By contrast, a relationship or marriage was viewed as potentially as much a source of strength as a drain.

Cassandra Ma managed a healthcare services business for the growing middle- and upper-classes in Beijing. She had recently turned 30. I asked her if turning 30 had caused her to worry at all. Cassandra replied “Sometimes. Because I want to have a baby but my work is so busy now. Sometimes I worry about what I should do first – work or [have a] baby.” ¹⁰ Cassandra spoke of her dream to ascend as far as possible in the healthcare services industry, and although she mentioned wanting to have a child by 33, it was clear that this desire would remain in competition with her commitment to her career.

Christy Liang was a 22-year-old who worked for one of the world’s top mining companies. She was in a long-term relationship with a man she thought she might marry one day, and viewed having a family as important. She said she wanted to have children, “but not within the next 5 years. I’ll be too busy developing my own career.” Christy had only recently begun working, and had been set ambitious promotion targets by the company as part of her hiring conditions. She was determined to meet them.

¹⁰ Interview WC 050527.
Jessica Tao, a 27-year-old lawyer for a foreign firm, told me that she wanted to have at least two children.\textsuperscript{11} When I asked her when she would like to have children, she said,

Now is the best age but I can’t. Work isn’t stable yet. But recently I had some good news – some American researchers published a study that said 36 was the best time to have children…. Which is great. So for me [it will be] after 30, when I have a stable job, and have the financial basis to support children.

There are a number of other examples of high-income women who explained their choice to delay (or even to completely forgo) having children in relation to the importance they placed on their career. Ava Zhong was a married 35-year-old woman who managed a firm of chartered accountants.\textsuperscript{12} She was one of the numerous women who said that practically speaking, she could not have had children in the career that she has had. Others who shared this view were Janine Jin and Kristina Tang. Both Ava and Janine still hoped to have a child one day, but Kristina had no such desires. She and her husband had never particularly wanted a child, and were happy with the lives they were able to lead without one.

\textit{I am a traditional woman}

While the highly educated women I interviewed commonly depicted themselves as “traditional women”, they generally did so in relation to the fulfilment of motherly and wifely roles – that is, the ‘\textit{xianqi liangmu}’ model. By contrast, a number of my high-income interviewees, perhaps aware of their the common public image of them as ‘Westernised’, self-indulgent types, were at pains to

\textsuperscript{11} Interview WC 050627.
\textsuperscript{12} Interview WC 050523.
highlight their ability to fulfil traditional expectations around being a good daughter. Cherie Cao and Jessica Tao both decided to return to Beijing after a period of absence and to stay in the city for the foreseeable future due in part to their parents. Both placed emphasis on the importance of being near their parents as they aged. Neither indicated that this was something their parents had formally requested, and it certainly was only one reason why their personal lives were as they were. Nonetheless, it was very influential. Cherie explained that,

Now my parents are getting older and older, there is a Chinese saying that says ‘don’t go away before your parent pass away’. I’m the kind of person who wants to be with their parents as much as I can.

Jessica, who still lives with her parents, expressed a similar sentiment:

I like to live alone but I was away from home for so long. My parents are getting older and older – every time I came back [from overseas] I noticed. So I want to spend some time with them before they get really old. This is an important reason why I came back to China.

That said, there were high-income women who at least in part defined themselves in relation to the wifehood/motherhood trope. While Ava Zhong admitted that her job had come first for a while, she was quick to state that she was easing off from her professional life soon with a view to having a baby. She said that she was not a particularly ambitious woman, she felt connected to her role as a wife, and she seriously considered becoming a full-time housewife if she had a baby. She had been married for nine years, and stated, “I enjoy it. I’m that kind of woman”. Joyce Cui felt that, as a woman who valued her
contribution as a wife and a mother, she did not match the common images of white-collar women in China: “I’m more traditional than that.”13

‘Quality of life’ is important to me

A trend that was quite clear in the high-income group but not in the highly educated group was the rise of ‘quality of life’ as a concept. These professional and business women had become highly aware of the idea of balance and ‘working to live’ rather than ‘living to work’ and used terminology from this broader discourse, common among the middle classes in other developed nations, in their own personal narratives. Subscription to ideas of ‘quality of life’ was most evident among those women who had lived abroad or who otherwise had meaningful international experience.

Cherie Cao, as was explained in her story above, had developed firm, considered views on ‘quality of life’ and life balance. Shirley Xu and Nina Tan similarly emphasised this in their decision-making. Shirley Xu, on graduating with a Masters in Engineering at the age of 24, chose a job that would enable her to have more free time, rather than one with a higher income.14 Such a choice enabled her to spend more time with her friends, on her numerous and wide-ranging social activities, and with her long-term boyfriend. After starting at this job, Shirley moved in with her boyfriend, bought a new car with him, and recently got married. Nina Tan, a 27-year-old woman who worked in the media industry and had studied in the UK, stated emphatically that working long hours and focussing only on her job was,

13 Interview WC 050608.  
14 Interview WC 050708.
Not my kind of lifestyle. I am trying to have balance. Because, I don’t know if I should say this, but I am not a person who has some big ambition. I know that if you have a big ambition, in order to achieve that you have to give up a lot of quality time. That’s not what I want. I don’t want to sacrifice everything…\textsuperscript{15}

When talking about what she \textit{did} want to achieve, Nina noted,

I turned 27 this year. I’m the manager of a company. I think that is pretty good and I am really satisfied with my job and I think I am making progress. But I don’t really have a very clear ambition for my job, for my work. I just want to make progress. To be honest I never think [that] I can be a CEO or something like that. I don’t want to be because I know if I am a CEO my life will be completely occupied with work, that’s for sure. So if there is that chance one day, maybe I’ll have to say no, because I have to keep a balance in my life. I want to get married before I am 30, and have a family, and have my children. I don’t want to have my children too late in my life. Maybe at 31 or 32… That is my life goal. I want to be happy. I want a very normal life. And I know I am not going to be very wealthy, but I think I am satisfied with the money that I get now.

It appears that the concept of life balance or quality of life was at times used by high-income women as a rhetorical tool that could justify moving between subject positions that might otherwise seem conflicting, for example between being happy to be single and wanting to be in a relationship, between being independent, modern women, and traditional wife-and-mother types, and between being workaholics and devoted family members. If these women could argue that the passage of their personal lives could be explained by their dedication to the concept of quality of life, this downplayed apparent contradictions and conferred both a greater sense of agency on them as actors

\textsuperscript{15} Interview WC 051227.
and a greater unity on their personal biographies. In invoking this concept, these women were also able to mediate between state expectations of them as both working “producers” and domestic “reproducers”.  

Living overseas changed me

A number of high-income women commented that their experiences living abroad had changed them in significant ways. A summary of the statistics for the high-income group suggests that such international experience, or perhaps being in a position where such international experience is possible, is in fact highly influential in determining one’s personal life course. Within the high-income group, 17 women had lived abroad. These women were from 24 to 42 years of age. Eight of these women were 30 years of age or older, an age at which gender and family norms would have expected them to be married and have a child. Yet none of these eight women, and in fact none of the 17 women, were currently in that situation.

The influence of her time in the UK on Cherie Cao has already been discussed. Two further strong examples of this international influence were the cases of Jessica Tao and Stacey Zhu. Jessica Tao was 27 years old. She had lived in Australia for several years, first completing her Masters and then working in several professional roles. Jessica said that her experience in Australia changed her a great deal: “From the way I treat people to the way I think about society. It has really changed me a lot, inside and out.”

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16 It is interesting at this point to recall Kathleen Erwin’s claims that competing state aims of ‘stability’ (wending) and ‘openness’ (kaifang) have led women in Shanghai to actively reinterpret traditional ideas such as ‘virtuous wife, good mother’ (xianqi liangmu) such that they are able to achieve goals of material success and mobility while still paying necessary heed to state and social pressures which require women to be located within families as a foundation of social stability. See Kathleen Erwin, ‘Liberating Sex, Mobilising Virtue: Cultural Reconstructions of Gender, Marriage, and Family in Shanghai, China [unpublished PhD dissertation], (University of California, 1998).

17 Interview WC 050627.
on her overall life including her personal life, as she sought more genuine relationships with people and paid less regard to status and material position.

Stacey Zhu worked in a foreign media outlet in Beijing. She was also 27. She had studied in Wales in her early twenties. Stacey Zhu stated that her time in Wales had had a huge influence on her. She explained that her childhood was very strict, with both her parents members of the military. She said all she was ever allowed to do was study; she had neither broader life skills nor much experience beyond military bases. And then,

> When I moved overseas, I felt really free. Everything depended on me. It really helped me grow up. I had to do everything myself, face everything on my own. And then there were also new rewards; I could earn my own money, develop my own views.

While she was living overseas Stacey Zhu dated an Italian man, spending the summer in Italy with him. She had several part-time jobs, which allowed her to travel and soak up more experiences. She felt that all these experiences influenced her life upon her return to China, in both professional and personal areas.

> I'm looking for the right person and the right relationship

The importance of finding the ideal life partner was conveyed by most of the high-income women I interviewed, regardless of their marital status. Even some of the most highly successful women in this group in terms of income and career achievement, women who themselves did not appear to conform to the gender norms that might be expected of them, made statements like, “at the
end of the day, in terms of the advice I’d give to young women, I’d say that the most important thing for a man is to find his right vocation. The most important thing for a woman is to find the right man.”

For those who were single, that they had not yet found the appropriate man was an explanation incorporated into their personal narratives. The Western term ‘Mr. Right’ was used by more than a few of my interviewees; however, most women were inclined to make some compromises in the face of reality. One of those who was not willing to compromise was Joanne Ying. Joanne was 31 years of age and single when I met her one afternoon in one of Beijing’s growing legion of Starbucks cafés. Joanne worked in advertising at the Chinese head office of a large Western food and beverage company. Despite emphatically expressing a desire to marry and have children one day, and despite being considered by most to be too old to be single, she was determined not to settle for a man who was not ‘Mr. Right’,

I think family is the most important thing for me, maybe for women in general. But if I cannot find the right guy for me, I won’t [get married]. I won’t compromise. At my age I should get married but if I don’t find the right person, I just won’t.

28-year-old Jasmine Wei responded sharply to the proposition that women should stop being so picky and just settle for someone nice and passable: “I don’t think that’s okay. I don’t think I can just make do. If I could just make do I would have got married earlier.”

She asked what other people said to me in relation to this. I said many of the people I interviewed had similar views, but for some there were particular

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18 This comment was made by Kristina Tang. Interview WC 051228.
reasons they had for being willing to compromise. Jasmine said that she understood why some women married for others, or because they wanted to have children. It was not as if she did not want to get married, in fact, she felt well and truly ready. She explained,

I think I could get married now, the time is already ripe. I’m ready to marry, but I just haven’t found the suitable person…I’d like to get married before 30. But I don’t want to just get married, I want to have children. But that’s very hard, I don’t know if I can realise this.

Jasmine noted that, in part due to the influence of her family, marriage had been on her mind for a while. She said that after she had graduated with her initial diploma her family and friends had tried to play matchmaker, introducing her to young men for a meal and a chat. She was only 20 years of age at the time, but she said,

I was still quite young, but where I come from people still think it’s a suitable age to get married. They think you should get married a bit earlier – like my age now, they think it’s too old. They think you are some kind of weird being, out of this world.

For those who had divorced, the relationship no longer being “the right relationship” and the man no longer being “the right person” were definitely factors. Elizabeth Ren stated that she and her husband divorced because of “personality differences”. Mary Zhou similarly indicated that this was a factor.

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19 Interview WC 050714.
20 Interview WC 050718.
I need to be accepted for who I am and treated as an equal

Arguably, that people accept you for who you are is a common human desire. For many high-income Beijing women I spoke to, a particularly challenging yet important element of this equation was the desire for men who were not afraid to be with a woman who was successful in her own right. Cherie Cao, who we met earlier, felt that men were often intimidated by her, and that this was a problem in finding a boyfriend. From another perspective, Cassandra Ma explained that one of the reasons she had picked her husband was because he was okay with her high status and professional achievement. She gave an enlivened response to a question I asked about whether Chinese men were often intimidated by successful women:

Yeah! That is why I chose my husband! He is very supportive and very proud of me. No pressure to stay at home and be a good wife. Always encourages me to try all kinds of new things and do what I want to do.

A desire for acceptance often translated into a desire for a relationship based on intellectual and emotional equality. Emma Hu, a woman in her early twenties who worked for a major international investment bank, thought that “the most important thing for a couple is that the two of them should be equals. I don’t think either one should take charge.” She described herself as a feminist, and said an important feature of her ideal husband would be that he would treat men and women equally. Janine Jin, a 36-year-old lawyer, said that she was a professional woman and so it should not be expected that she would take primary responsibility for looking after the home. She expected a fair division of responsibilities in her household, and that her partner would cook, do

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21 Interview WC 050705.
housework and so on. Mary Zhou’s unhappiness at being treated like “a servant” by her parents-in-law, who lived with she and her husband, was one of the factors causing her to initiate a divorce. She resented being devalued and discriminated against as the daughter-in-law.

The need for acceptance and equality was also evident in the narrative of Annette Luo who, at 24 years of age, was already a senior management accountant for the Beijing offices of an international industrial company. She had been dating a man of a similar age since they met while she was studying for her Masters overseas. I asked if they had any marriage plans, and she replied,

We get along well but we are still apart in terms of personality. He wants me to move to Shanghai after marriage but I dislike Shanghai. And his family is very traditional. They think that the woman should go to the man’s family after marriage. But I don’t agree.

She thought perhaps they could get around this by moving abroad together, but if that opportunity did not arise, she thought they would not marry. Annette indicated that there may be other upsides to a potential ending of the relationship: she complained that while she had a clear vision of what she wanted to achieve professionally in the next five years, her boyfriend by contrast “just wants to become a senior accountant. He doesn’t have big dreams like me.”

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22 Interview WC 050715Z.
23 Interview WC 050623.
I really want to have a baby

As hinted at in earlier parts of this chapter, the strong desire to have a child was influential in the considerations made by a number of these women about their lives. Few women of the high-income group expressed motherhood or childbirth as being their natural or biological purpose as a woman, but rather as an enriching experience they would like to have. The desire encouraged some to expedite marriage as much as possible. For others, usually women beyond 30 years of age, it caused them to start exploring alternative paths for personal fulfilment that did not involve a man.

Cherie Cao fell squarely in the first category. Her desires for children were conveyed in her story above. In terms of the second category, Penny Ang, 33, was already considering the option of becoming a single mother, and had begun to accustom her inner circle to this idea. Penny was not the only one of the women I interviewed who raised this possibility. Joanne Ying, 31, suggested she might do the same. It is interesting to note that none of the women in the highly educated group mentioned this option. It appears thus that the ability to comfortably support a child on one’s own income may be an important factor behind thinking about having a child without a husband or partner. That these women view of themselves as capable people could be another factor. A third factor might be that, in contrast to traditional views which see motherhood as a role that can only be fulfilled as a result of marriage, these women are able to conceptually separate motherhood from wifehood.
I am scared about having children; I’m not ready

While many of the high-income women I interviewed felt they were not ready to have children yet, it was interesting that two of the married women were particularly strong in their views on this issue. In 2006, Jean Xue stated that she and her husband “plan to have children next year. Is it the year of the horse or pig? Pig, yes… Because you know in China traditionally the pig is a very lucky animal”. Jean was already 38 years of age. She had left the resolution of the “question of children” rather late – and not simply according to Chinese standards. One of the main reasons was that she was scared by the pressure she felt would come with having children. She felt it would change her life and she was not yet ready for that.

Georgia Li had a similar view, although she was significantly younger than Jean. Georgia worked for IBM China. When I first spoke with her she was about to turn 29, and she had been married for a year and a half. Georgia initially said that one of the reasons she was delaying having a child was because she wanted to focus on her career for the moment. But later she admitted that the main reason for the delays was that she was scared of motherhood, of the pressure and the responsibility, and that she still “felt like a child herself”. She went on to say “I want to establish myself at work, to stabilise things there a bit. But mostly, in my heart I am just not ready yet.”

Practical and economic concerns

As perhaps is to be expected, the high-income women I spoke to were less concerned with being able to afford life’s essentials than were women within the highly educated group. Most owned their own homes and enjoyed a
comfortable material life. Where economic concerns arose in their narratives, it was mostly in relation to how to safeguard their existing position, and where practical concerns arose, it was usually a question of how to manage all their commitments at once. In both cases, issues most commonly arose in relation to having or raising children.

Nina Tan, a media professional, was 27 when I first spoke with her. She was not married but had a boyfriend. She indicated she would consider having a child, but was adamant that she would not consider having any more than one, even if that were permissible, due to the cost factor – “I couldn’t afford it”.

Joyce Cui, a 38-year-old woman who worked in the pharmaceutical sales industry, was married with one child. She stated,

My child is big now; she is actually a help. She does her own thing, and she can also help me. For example in pinyin she is much stronger than me! So now it’s great… When she was small, on the other hand, I was exhausted.

Joyce also said that her husband was very helpful with the child and that as a result she did not have to do too much. Given all of this, I asked Joyce if she had thought about having more children. She said yes she had, but at her age the opportunity had probably passed, but perhaps more importantly she and her husband were worried about the economic burden.

The obligations inherent in 29-year-old Lynette Ge’s 80-hour-a-week media company CEO role meant that even though she was not planning to have children for another couple of years, she was already worrying about exactly how she would manage. She said she would take a few months’ break, and then leave them with her boyfriend’s parents, who live in Beijing, or hire a
nanny. She said his parents “would like to help me with the children if I have them.” I asked if Lynette would want to have one or more children, if the government allowed it. Her mind more on the time issue than the political question, Lynette replied, “If I could have twins that would be great. It would save time!”

*The views of others*

*My parents have certainly influenced how I have approached my life*

Many of the high-income women, particularly those under 35 years of age, mentioned the influence of parents vis-à-vis having children. A number of these women indicated that they themselves were not overly keen on having a baby, but might consider doing so to satisfy their parents. As Stacey Zhu observed, “I think to have a child is something I would do not for myself, but for my parents, because they really want me to have a little kid. A grandson or a granddaughter, they would love one.”

In terms of parental influence, there was also the case of Emma Hu, whose story was steeped in the desire to prove her father wrong. Emma was focused on professional and economic success, but more for what this would symbolise than for what the money could buy. An only child, she was told from a young age that her father’s biggest disappointment in life was that she was not male. She recounted the story of his angry, grieved response to her birth, and said that he never forgave her for being a girl.

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24 Interview WC 060205.
Emma had recently graduated as the top-ranked student of one of the most desirable departments at one of the country’s most prestigious universities. Her mother had made the trip from south-west China to attend her graduation ceremony and enjoy the accolades. Her father had refused. Emma openly explained that the disappointment her father felt about her gender had always spurred her to work as hard as she could, “to prove I was better than a boy”.

Prior to graduation, Emma had been awarded a coveted position at one of the world’s best known investment banks. Her starting salary was 250,000 RMB per annum. This was more than four times the salaries offered to even her most talented classmates, and was also expected to rise rapidly. When I spoke to her, Emma had only recently begun at the bank, and reported that she frequently worked around 100 hours a week. She was aware of how such work commitments would render almost impossible any kind of social or romantic life, and that she would be unlikely to find a boyfriend in the next few years let alone think about marriage or children, but she was content to put those areas of her life on the backburner to focus on proving her worth in terms her father might understand.

*My husband has constrained my life choices*

For some of the high-income women, being married has meant they have not been able to pursue some of the things in life they really wanted. Not all of these were personal – some were more career-related. For example, Ava Zhong wanted to pursue further study but was not going to: “My husband won’t let me. He says I already have enough. I have to respect what he says, he is my husband, we are married.”
The impact of one's husband on one's personal life choices is demonstrated by the case of Dianne Wei. When we first met, Dianne was the 31-year-old owner of a chain of beauty salons in Beijing and surrounding suburbs. Dianne married at 20 years of age and had a daughter a year later. She separated from her husband when she was 26, but despite desperately wanting a divorce had never been granted one. The reason for this was that her husband was in the army, and Chinese regulations make divorcing a man in the defence forces extremely difficult. Dianne felt that if she pursued it too stridently she could lose everything – including custody of her child. She would have liked to find a new partner, as she said, “because I think your life can’t just be for your child, it also has to be for yourself.” However, since she was not technically divorced, if she “messed with the meaning of marriage, it would be trouble.”

Conceptions of the model mate

One’s ‘ideal life partner’ was a topic about which high-income women spoke particularly openly and freely. As was suggested in the section above, finding the right person and the right relationship was significant in both the unfolding of their personal lives and the ways in which they spoke of these personal lives. But who was the ‘right person’? With what kind of man did they hope to develop these democratic, accepting relationships?

The top three specific criteria put forward by high-income women were ‘responsible’, ‘has his own career’ and ‘caring and kind’ in that order. If these men could also be intelligent, honest and have a positive attitude it certainly would not hurt. Having a sense of responsibility was clearly an important requirement in a partner for both highly educated and high-income women.
Approximately one-third of each cohort made specific reference to this trait. Shirley Xu, who worked for an international computer hardware company, said that “a husband must take more responsibility for the family. A man could be wild, a playboy, and it’s okay. But if he has committed to being a husband, then he has to change something.” Elizabeth Ren, the client relations manager at a large international law firm, expressed the view that an ideal husband would be “responsible – for society and also for his family.”

At the broader level, among the high-income women one theme that arose was that they wanted a man who had a sense of his own self, his own personality, and his own drive, ambition or purpose. Most importantly, this man’s sense of self, personality, and life and career drive should ideally match their own personality and life and career goals. In terms of mate preference as it related to career specifically, Dianne Wei felt that being “career-minded” was at the top of what she looked for in a partner. Joanne Ying also felt that “at my age, you should not just look at his potential but also whether he has achieved something. Thirty is a turning point. Your career should have started from here.”

For about a third of the high-income interviewees the desire for a strong partner was expressed as specifically being for a partner who was stronger than they were themselves. Jasmine Wei was firm in her desires to ‘marry up’. When it came to her ideal man,

He should definitely be stronger than me. I think some other women can probably let this one go, but for me I can’t. For me to like a guy, I want to be able to look up to him. If he’s not stronger than me, I can’t look up to him. And if I don’t look up to him like that, then I just can’t accept that. Actually, a lot of
women around me when they get to a certain age just let these kind of things

go, and then discover afterwards that it really wasn’t such a good idea!

Ruth Hu, who worked for one of China’s leading transport and logistics
companies, wanted a man who was stronger and more independent than
herself – but unlike Jasmine, she said she had found one. When talking about
what she looked for in a partner, she commented that her current boyfriend was
quite ideal. She said, “I am very strong and independent. So I want somebody
even stronger than me and also at least as independent.” Joanne Ying
expressed similar sentiments. She told me that she liked older men – her ex-
boyfriend was nine years older than her. She also mentioned that she likes
men with established careers, and that any potential mate should earn at least
as much as she does.

Sexual chemistry was seen as particularly desirable for some women, although
necessarily difficult to define. Stacey Zhu decided to end a long-term
relationship due to its absence. Stacey made this decision at the age of 28 –
which, in light of the strong pressures to marry by 30, entailed considerable
attachment to her own ideals of partnership. Stacey noted that her decision
was considered by some people who did not know her well as a little strange as
the man was a well-paid engineer of good character and moral fibre. When we
first spoke, Stacey was still seeing this man, but she said to me,

His qualities and characteristics are excellent. But, some people might say, um,
he’s more like a friend to me. I don’t have that kind of passion, that kind of
‘chemistry’. So I think if you don’t have that feeling of chemistry, then you aren’t
really meant to be going out with them…. I think I just need to be loyal to
myself. I’m in that somewhat selfish mode of thought. I know I don’t like this
guy like that. So if I find one I do, well….  

Six months later Stacey realised her plan, and began dating an old childhood
friend who she ran into through work and with whom there was serious
chemistry. Less than a year after that, the two of them married.

In addition to wanting a strong individual with his own career, and preferably a
man with whom they had chemistry, many high-income women expressed a
desire for men who were kind, supportive and who would be loyal to their wives,
combining ideas of passionate love, comfort love, and sexual desire. Cassandra Ma had sought “a nice and honest man. Very
diligent. Always supports me no matter what... That is why I chose my husband. He is very
supportive and very proud of me.” Similarly, Tammy Niu, a 29-year-old
advertising executive, described her ideal partner as,

Reliable. Will be with me forever. Will not cheat... Intelligent. Quick mentally.
Not too dominating. Of course someone I can talk to about anything, even
boring stuff. And very understanding and accommodating. My current boyfriend
is really accommodating. Some men just don’t understand how busy we are.

So these women prized men who were strong in the way they faced the world
and soft in the way they faced their wives. In other words, a focussed individual
– focussed on his career and on his female romantic partner. Christy Liang’s
preferences for an ideal husband or boyfriend exemplifies this type of thinking.
She said that she was looking for,

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25 Interview WC 060205.
26 For a further discussion of these three strands of emotional connection, see William R. Jankowiak (ed.), Intimacies: Love and Sex across Cultures (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
27 Interview WC 050526.
Firstly, respect. This is very important. A good husband should respect the opinions of his wife. ...And trust... And he should have his own career. Honesty. Maybe trust contains honesty. And his own confidence. Maybe this is related to his own career. And concern for family members. So that's it – respect, trust, honesty, confidence, career success, family – that would be fantastic.

Mate preference among the two high-status groups

When it comes to mate preference among the highly educated and high-income women, in some cases the different emphases in the two groups seems an almost natural outgrowth of their own careers and identities. For example, while only two high-income women mentioned having a well-educated partner as a preference, having at least some tertiary education was one of the most popular criteria for highly educated women. Lucy Qin stipulated that "if I've got a PhD degree the man must at least be an undergraduate. He doesn't have to have a Masters or even a PhD.... I think undergraduate is enough for me. Okay, Masters is better. PhD is.... No thanks.... I think if both of us are academics it won't be very interesting for us, for our family life." Marlene Zhao also stated, like many others, that while "academic qualifications are not the most important" they must have at least "some tertiary education."

By the same token, twice as many high-income women as highly educated women said they wanted a man with his 'own career'. Isabelle Lu, a 26-year-old junior executive in a major international public relations firm, was fairly representative when she said, "I like ambitious men. [Who] have a good career." A man having a positive attitude was very popular amongst my high-income group of interviewees, but a desire for the trait was never mentioned by
the highly educated group. This was also the case for strength. If the criteria ‘strong’ and ‘stronger than me’ were combined, this trait was also one of the most highly sought-after among the high-income women. The link between valuing ambition and career success in a mate and the emphasis high-income women place on these features in their own lives is immediately apparent. The desire for a man who is caring, kind, honest, loyal and supportive may have also been bolstered by their experience in the tough corporate world. In addition, such romantic desires may have been amplified by the greater exposure many of these women have to many of the trappings of romantic consumerism and to popular cultural products such as international magazines and films.

One of the more surprising omissions from the list of qualities preferred by my highly educated interviewees was ‘honesty’. One might presume that given the general preference of this group for a dependable, family-oriented partner or spouse, honesty would be a pivotal feature of such a man’s personality. Perhaps the women in this group considered honesty to be an inextricable part of these other characteristics, not requiring a separate mention. Perhaps voicing true honesty was not so important in light of expectations that this person would subordinate at least some of his individual wishes and opinions to the needs of others. Or perhaps, in consonance with the findings of Yan Yunxiang in the rural Chinese context, honesty could be seen as somewhat of a liability in an increasingly commercialised world.28

The fact that honesty was a popular criterion for high-income women supports the hypothesis that two influences in their framing of an ideal mate might be their experiences in the corporate and commercial worlds and their sense of

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romanticism derived from a great degree of exposure to modern, romantic consumerist products. This is consistent with Xu Anqi’s research, discussed in Chapter 3, which showed that there has been a rise of romantic consumerism as a factor that influences the selection of partners and that the trend towards emphasising romance and feelings is particularly pronounced among those who are young, cultured, or have a comparatively high work position.\(^{29}\) In relation to the motivation proposed by Yan Yunxiang, it could be that having a partner burdened with a perceived commercial weakness like honesty is less of a concern to women who have their own very notable commercial strengths.

Another category of criteria that interestingly appeared in the responses of one group quite a few times but never in the other was that of physical appearance. A number of highly educated women, such as Lisa Yang, Amy Wang, and Lauren Lai, said that it was essential that their partner not be ‘too ugly’. In addition, many women in this group noted they wanted ‘tall’ men – as Nancy Zheng put it, “[he] must be taller than 180cm. I think that looks good together. But not too tall. I don’t want my kids to be overly tall.” However, none of the high-income women mentioned either a basic level of physical attractiveness, nor a minimum requirement regarding height. A very small number did show concern for the grooming of a man, such as having ‘nice hair’ or dressing well.

Finally, the preference for a boyfriend or spouse to have a ‘good family background’ was only raised by members of the highly educated cohort, with the general concern that it be ‘uncomplicated’. It appeared that this term conjured up images of simple, conventional families who were un tarnished by claims of political or other improprieties. This emphasis on family among the highly educated might be because the academic environment in China is

\(^{29}\) 徐安琪 [Xu Anqi], ‘择偶标准：五十年变迁及其原因分析’ [Mate Preference Criteria: Analysis of Changes over the Last 50 Years], 社会学研究 [Sociological Research], 6 (2000), pp. 18-30.
generally more insular, ‘traditional’, and stable than the highly interconnected international corporate environment, leading to these women having a mate preference outlook that is more inward-looking and that places a greater emphasis on family and stability. It might also have some relationship to lingering anxiety about the political persecution of intellectuals through the Maoist period and in the not-so-distant past.

It is worth comparing the traits desired by my interviewees with those reportedly desired by female clients of marriage agencies more broadly. I have reconstructed the table first presented in Chapter 3 to now include comparative information on the highly educated and high-income women. While previously the data in this table represented a raw count of numbers of people who had put certain criteria first, given the varying sample sizes I have revised the data to reflect relative popularity (i.e. a rank) among the specific cohort concerned. The category temper/temperament reported in the original table has been considered roughly equivalent to the “caring and kind” requirement expressed by my interviewees. I have included four additional criteria so that the top five qualities desired by my interviewees are represented.

Compared with the marriage agency-derived data, the highly educated women appear to be less concerned that their potential partners have a successful career, a good basic economic situation and income, a good family background, or a pleasant appearance. They placed marginally more importance than the marriage agency respondents on responsibility, and significantly more importance on valuing family, temperament/being caring and kind, and the education level of their mate.
Table 20. Relative ranks of mate preference criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality/Criterion</th>
<th>Rank within marriage agency data</th>
<th>Rank within highly educated interviewee data</th>
<th>Rank within high-income interviewee data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Successful career</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>=2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of responsibility</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>=1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good basic economic situation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income level</td>
<td>=4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family background</td>
<td>=4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>=6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>=6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament/temper</td>
<td>=8</td>
<td>(caring &amp; kind =1)</td>
<td>(caring &amp; kind =2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>=8</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultured</td>
<td>=8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own property</td>
<td>=8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have money</td>
<td>=8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values family</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks after me and others</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interviews with marriage agency staff members and high-status women.  

The high-income women were similarly less concerned than the marriage agency respondents about their partner having a good basic economic situation and income, a good family background, or a pleasant appearance. More value was placed on temperament, on having a positive attitude, and on the potential partner being honest. This is interesting in light of Xu Anqi’s research, which indicates that while a partner’s job and income might rise in importance as the education level of the mate-seeker increased, if one’s own economic background was good, a mate-seeker was less likely to be too concerned about the economic position of a potential partner.  

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30 Note that, using common numbering practice in relation to ranks, two items have the same rank that is designated with an “=” sign, for example =1. The next ranked item is then designated in third place, as it follows two other items.  
The sections on conceptions of a model mate in both this and the preceding chapter have addressed what highly educated and high-income women look for in a boyfriend or husband. Through the discussion of the mate preference ideals of these high-status women, the framework they apply to finding a mate becomes clear. While the discourse at times accuses these women of being fundamentally materialistic and concerned with external measures such as income and social status, my interviews suggest that this is not the case. Instead, when asked to put forward their own views on what they looked for in a mate, they emphasised responsibility, intelligence, stability, kindness, a positive attitude, and a valuing of family. These are criteria that are not overly materialistic, as the discourses on high-status women claim, and are in line with widely-held conceptions of what makes a good man.

Desires and decisions – high-income women in comparison

On the broader level of romantic lives and personal desires, in Chapter 5 I noted that many of the highly educated women I spoke to infused their stories with ideas of obligation, particularly obligation to family members. Jane Lin clearly conceived of herself as a woman who had initially lived her life for other people, with unhappy results. Other highly educated women saw themselves as limited in their agency in different ways. Hannah Yao, for example, constituted herself in the model of the woman handicapped in her pursuit of a happy personal life by the public perception that women who achieved too much were not desirable. When compared with highly educated women like these, the high-income cohort demonstrated a relatively stronger sense of individualism and agency. Most of them had come to see themselves first and
foremost as individuals with their own legitimate desires. Whether to be in a relationship or not, and what kind of relationship if any to be in, were understood primarily as their own choices. The development of their lives and their identities were projects over which they expected to have a substantial amount of control. For example, the key thread in Jean Xue’s biographical narrative was to “do what felt right for her”. It has become the theme around which she has structured an understanding and telling of her life, as well as an approach to its future direction.

This sort of view resonates with philosophical and sociological works such as those by Anthony Giddens, Jean-Paul Sartre and Ulrich Beck which examine the rise of self-reflexivity. The central argument within these writings is that life is a project always in the making, a project that is in the hands of the individual concerned and not controlled by external forces, like tradition and religion, which may have played determining roles in the past. Some authors, including Giddens, argue that this is a situation specific to high or late modernity. Giddens defines high modernity as something “roughly equivalent to ‘the industrialised world’ – as long as it is recognised that industrialism is not its only institutional dimension”.\(^{32}\) Other writers such as Richard Jenkins disagree with this point, claiming that human beings have always been required to constitute themselves and their identities in such a way.\(^{33}\)

In any case, according to this school of thought, self-identity is driven by agency; it is predominantly achieved, not ascribed. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim put it, late modernity challenges individuals to “confront their own life as a project, as a ‘do-it-yourself biography’ in which everything must be

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decided. While this situation on the surface appears freeing, it also has the potential to cause a great deal of anxiety. To manage a life-project successfully ideally one needs a clear vision for the final outcome(s), careful calculation of the steps that are necessary to reach them, and substantial long-term planning and risk management.

Giddens argues that the life-project of many individuals is affected in an important way by their contact with so-called ‘expert’ knowledge. Expert knowledge might include, for example, accessible information on the best age to have children or the best age to marry, or on “what makes one happy in life”. In the Chinese context, it is noteworthy that well-known advice books like *Chicken Soup for the Soul* by Jack Canfield are widely available and enormously popular in Chinese translation in Beijing, as are other Western pop-psychology classics such as those by ‘happiness experts’ like Dr. Martin Seligman. Such knowledge is brought to bear on one’s approach to the future and in particular invites both the continuation of a backward-looking process of constituting the self and a conscious planning for the future realisation of this self.

My high-income interviewees were notable in the way they consciously planned and mapped out how they were going to live their lives. Penny Ang was one of the women in this group who demonstrated a clear sense of strategising for the future. Penny was juggling a number of things in her life: she was running a business involving a significant amount of international travel; she was applying to do her PhD through an institution abroad, although potentially part-time while still working; and she was considering having a child on her own. Her three clearly identified goals were to be a mother, to be a university lecturer, and to

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own a consultancy company, and her attempts to manage so many things at once were part of a plan designed to achieve all of these goals.

Mary Zhou was another high-income woman who saw existence as a series of opportunities and risks, which should be weighed up and acted upon in a way that gave fullest effect to what was in one’s heart. As mentioned in her story told earlier in this chapter, Mary had given up a lucrative corporate career for a passion for social justice issues, and walked out of marriage to what many Chinese would have seen as a good, solid match for the possibility of a soul mate. Mary described these choices as part of an overall plan for spiritual and emotional fulfilment through a life full of new adventures and learning. She had completed a Masters in journalism, and had all but completed a second Masters in developmental and educational psychology. “I did the 12 core courses but not the thesis. I used my Saturdays to do this. Now I have to first do the graduation exam and then I can write my thesis.” In addition, to seek creative balance and betterment of her life, Mary has taken classes in subjects as diverse as costume design, industrial design, water painting, and tailoring. She still really wants to study oil painting, and she is proud of the fact that some of her poetry has been read over the radio. “I also learned the piano for a while. I bought one and got a teacher so that my daughter could learn when she was 4. But she didn’t like it. So I said why not teach me?” Mary saw that life presented numerous opportunities and she wanted to seize as many of them as possible to create a fulfilled, complete life. As she said to me the first time we met, “I think I can do many things at once, and should; otherwise I’d have to live until 500 to have time to do everything!”

Annette Luo was another example of this project management-type approach to life. A senior management accountant for an international firm, Annette wanted to move to Brisbane, having previously studied in Australia. But
according to her plan such a move would only occur “after my marriage. I want to get married first, then go abroad.” And then, in terms of having children, she felt that,

The younger the better…I still need to get some qualifications for my career. I need these for promotion. So I need to study and work at the same time… It is hard for working people to also find time to study. It will be even harder if I get married and have a child. That’s why I say younger is better. If I have a baby and my parents are still not old they can help.

In terms of the influence of ‘expert’ knowledge on the construction and management of one’s life-project, Jessica Tao provides an interesting example. She was 27 years old and had a boyfriend. She articulated various reasons to explain why she was not in a hurry to get married and was likely to put off having children. A major reason was that she wanted greater career stability first. But she was able to feel comfortable in following this course of action because she had looked into the ideal age for having children, and had read a study that apparently stated that the best age to start a family for a woman was 36 years of age.

The desire to have children was quite strong among the high-income women, although in reality only four of the thirty-five already had a child. All of the women I spoke to who had not already had children but who wished to have them at some stage wished to do so in the context of a loving, lasting relationship. While many highly educated women related the idea of having children to the fulfilment of one of their key roles as a woman, high-income women had a slightly different take on the situation, tending to describe motherhood as an experience they, as individuals, wished to have. Some high-income were resigned to the fact that the right man may never come and that in
his absence they might have to pursue other options on their own. Penny Ang was one of these women, as was Joanne Ying. Their exploration of the possibility of single motherhood is just one example of how high-income women sought to negotiate their way around barriers to the personal life they desired. Their narratives showed that a source of confidence in these times was the belief that they were successful, capable women who could get by on their own if necessary. And their acceptance of the concept of single motherhood sits in stark contrast with the views of older, highly educated women, one of whom laughed when I asked her whether or not she had children and said “I’m not married, so where would I get kids from? China isn’t like the West in that way.”

A small proportion of the high-income women did feel that their personal life choices were constrained because many men were intimidated by their success. In addition, the unmarried women of this group were as much or more a source of concern to their loved ones, particularly their parents, as were the unmarried women of the highly educated group. However, while this concern may have resulted in some of the single high-income women feeling some guilt, and while many felt understanding and compassion towards their worried relatives, it rarely compelled these women to actually revise their personal life goals in a way that was otherwise undesirable to them.

While many of the examples of the tendency to see one’s life as a project and to plan it as such come from the ranks of my high-income interviewees, within the highly educated cohort there is evidence that this approach is beginning to find favour amongst the younger generation of intellectuals. Charlotte Wu, Lucy Qin, and Amy Wang were just some of the PhD students and graduates under 30 years of age who made it clear that they saw their life as something that was

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35 This comment was made by 54-year-old Robyn Yuan. Interview ED 050628W.
theirs to be ‘fully lived’. There were discrete goals that they knew they wanted to achieve and they had structured their education and other personal life choices around attaining these goals. If being in a state of high modernity is indeed the key to the dominance of the ‘life as project’ approach within a society, perhaps the varying uptake of this approach within my interview sample in part reflects the varying degrees of engagement within that sample with the better known trappings of high modernity, including the internationalised commercial world. The younger highly educated women, while not engaged in the corporate world in the way that their high-income sisters are, nonetheless generally consider themselves quite cosmopolitan.

In terms of interpretative repertoires, for women of both the high-income and the highly educated groups the terms ‘normal woman’ and ‘traditional woman’ were clear markers of self-definition. Highly educated women tended to identify fairly closely with this model of wifehood and motherhood, whereas many high-income women fluctuated between this model and a professionally-oriented, independent modern model of womanhood (take for example Cherie Cao and Penny Ang). This is most likely because there is less in the post-graduation professional life of the highly educated women that challenges their ability to perform their gender-based family roles. In the case of the high-income women, both the expectations in terms of working hours and the results in terms of income and independence do challenge these gender-based roles and these women are forced to move between the two subject positions both in their behaviours and in their self-descriptions.

Noticeable within the high-income group, but less discernible in the highly educated group, was an expressed commitment to what might be termed individual ‘quality of life’, that is, a balance between one’s work and one’s personal life, or working so that one may live well, rather than living simply in
order to work. This commitment was particularly clear among those women who had spent a substantial amount of time living abroad. For many this concept translated into a quest for more and better-spent leisure time. But for others it meant a greater cultivation of their spiritual side. The need to give due attention to these aspects of their lives was an important influence on the decisions that they made about their personal lives and the way in which they justified these decisions.

Another significant feature within the stories and circumstances of the members of the high-income group was the prevalence of a particular relationship model or outlook. This model emphasised living one’s life in happy parallel with a partner with whom one shared a democratic relationship, for as long as that happiness prevailed. That is to say, these women appeared to seek something akin to what Anthony Giddens described as the “pure relationship”, based on “confluent love”. 36 While some members of the highly educated group appeared to frame relationships in such a way, it was somewhat less discernible than within the high-income group. And in both groups, this outlook was most noticeable among those who had spent time living abroad or who had otherwise had significant international exposure, and who were earning the highest salaries.

It is understandable that professional achievement and increases in education and income may raise women’s general sense of entitlement to equality and respect within a relationship. In addition, my interview data outlined earlier in this chapter supports the argument that international exposure, gained particularly from time spent living abroad, has had an influence on the opinions these women had about life and love. In particular, it appears to be one of the

factors contributing to an emphasis on quality of life, a sense of the need to be true to oneself and one’s identified life purpose, and a view that emotional satisfaction in a relationship is important and that, when such satisfaction fades, one may want to consider moving on. International exposure is likely a significant factor because it brings them into contact with ideas not shared among their usual familial or friendship groups. In the case of living abroad, for many of these women this was the first time they felt truly away from their families and their ways of thinking and this enabled them to reassess their own thinking. Generally speaking only the most financially well-off Chinese have the capacity to access international travel or are able to live abroad, and these material circumstances may also have contributed to the predominance of such thinking.

It appears then that the difference between broader norms and the romantic behaviour and personal life courses of at least some of these women is made possible by the presence of particular views on love and relationships, perhaps influenced by substantial international exposure, and having the financial wherewithal to act upon such beliefs. Some of the highly educated women and perhaps all of the high-income women did not need to get married or stay married for their own economic security or for that of their children. While not free from all constraints in their personal life choices, for these women being able to financially ‘get by’ did not have to be a consideration.
Chapter 7: Realising the Dream — Matchmaking Methods and Life Choices

The previous two chapters established that many women in the high-income group view their life as a project within their control. Within the highly educated group this view had less of a comprehensive hold but was still apparent, particularly among the younger women. This chapter explains how high-status women in contemporary Beijing go about finding a person or situation consistent with their desires and visions for their personal lives. While this could mean a husband, some alternative realisation of the ‘pure relationship’, or a single life, for the majority of the women I interviewed what was truly desired was a partnership with a man of the type described in the previous chapter. How did high-status women go about finding such a man? What options were available to them? Did these women face a situation similar to that described by Retherford et. al. in Chapter 1, whereby the decline in arranged marriage in Japan had major effects on both age at marriage and chances of never marrying because a fully functioning marriage market has not formed to fill the vacuum? The first part of this chapter outlines matchmaking options in urban China. The range available suggests that the absence of a functioning marriage market cannot be pointed to as the reason behind higher rates of non-marriage among high-status women in Beijing. In fact, these women have access to

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The possibilities for finding a mate

Some of the methods for finding a mate that are available to high-status women in China today have been in existence for hundreds of years, while others represent new developments in matchmaking in the twenty-first century. Many are a blend of the old and the new. The effects of technology, increased literacy, and a change in the nature and extent of social activity outside the family and community have been significant. The main methods used by urban Chinese are marriage agencies; pre-existing social, familial, or regional networks; introductions by others; online dating; and singles activities.

Pre-existing networks

The use of pre-existing networks to meet a partner is a common method in many societies, past and present. In contemporary China, these networks can be social, educational and vocational in nature, or based on family ties and hometown connections. In contrast to situations where formal introductions take place, partnerships that have developed out of these networks ordinarily begin in a more spontaneous fashion, grow out of friendships, and are initiated by the single men and women concerned.

Within the highly educated and high-income groups in urban China, the workplace could be expected to be one of the places that a single man or
woman might be most likely to encounter their future partner. However, commentary in the popular media suggests that in one’s immediate workplace people feel too busy to even think about trying to strike up a romance and are unable to see colleagues as anything other than colleagues. Broader work circles may be more promising – a counterpart that one meets from time to time at semi-social gatherings, or a person in a similar industry to you that you encounter in a non-work setting, might offer more romantic possibilities. These media observations are supported by my interview data.

University and school networks, as well as purely social networks formed through similar interests and shared activities, are the pre-existing networks that have the most potential for romantic gain for the more highly educated. The ‘campus courtship’ culture will be discussed in greater detail below.

Introductions by others

Being introduced to a partner by a matchmaker or an acquaintance has historically been a major way through which mates have been found. This was discussed in Chapter 2, where it was explained that during the Mao era work units and community organisations played a central role in matchmaking, supporting the prevailing ideological position when it came to relationships and oftentimes helping to facilitate politically appropriate pairings through party-sanctioned social events.

Despite the demise of the arranged marriage, the growth of ‘free-choice’ in the seeking of spouses over the past century, and the retreat of the state from this
domain, being introduced to potential partners by people you already know remains a common occurrence in urban China. While some of these introductions are resisted by the men and women at the centre of the spouse-seeking activity, others are accepted and even sought out as a method of solving their ‘personal problem’ (个人问题). Many single men and women and their families feel that, in an increasingly impersonal world, the safest and most reliable pairings are those made through known connections and trusted circles.

A special class of introduction: Twenty-first century parental intervention

It has been shown throughout this dissertation that many educated urban women and men take their time to find a mate, accepting that with the lengthening of the time spent on their education and with the pressures of work and building a career, marriage is less and less likely to occur before their early or even mid twenties. The parents of these single women and men, however, are frequently far less willing to wait to see them settle down. Concerns about the time it is taking their children to find a mate and about the types of men or women their children have been dating have led to the current generation of parents attempting to take the matchmaking of their urban children into their own hands.

Fumu xiangqin, or literally ‘parent’s matchmaking’, appears to have begun in Beijing in the second half of 2004, and has since become a well-known phenomenon. The practice involves the gathering together of parents who do

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3 See for example Anonymous, ‘相亲：都市恋爱的主流模式’, (updated 29 November 2005)
not otherwise know each other to look for marriage partners for their adult
children among the children of the others in attendance. These get-togethers
are held on a regular basis at public locations, usually large, centrally located
parks.

Figure 2. Placards laid out at a fumu xiangqin session in
Zhongshan Park, Beijing in October 2006.

The phenomenon flowed out of a column in the popular daily newspaper
Beijing Wanbao (Beijing Evening Post). The column encouraged people to
write in and tell their stories, and many older people wrote in with their
concerns about their working children, who were too busy to find a mate. In
response to this sharing of stories, some of the likeminded parents got together
in a park in the south of Beijing, near the Temple of Heaven. After this first
attempt the attendees decided that the park was not in an appropriate area,
that is, it did not draw suitable socio-economic groups, and that they should
move elsewhere. They moved to two locations – one at Zhongshan Park in the
centre of the city (where Joanne Ying’s parents had attended), and one in a

为工作耽误终身大事 大龄青年又面择偶难’, (updated 4 December 2005) http://news.xinhuanet.com/focus/2005-
12/04/content_3834942.htm, accessed 4 December 2005.
park next to the national library in the university and IT district (Haidian). The former operated on Thursdays and Sundays from 1pm, and the later on Saturday afternoons only.

During *fumu xiangqin* get-togethers, parents normally bring along a package of information about their child, including copies of their identification card, household registration (*hukou*) documentation, and qualifications. Photo albums are also brought along as part of the sales pitch. In order to facilitate conversation, most attendees draw up placards summarising the key information about their children, such as gender, age, height, education and occupation. Some parents hold these in their hands, others lay them out in from of them while they take a seat on a park bench, and others hang them on a string around their necks.

Parents attending the get-together circulate among other attendees. Conversation often starts with a brisk “[do you have a] boy or a girl?” followed by a “how old?”, irrespective of the fact that this information is often readily available from the placard they are holding or sitting next to. After more detailed conversation, parents who feel that their children might be appropriate for each other then exchange the phone numbers of the children. In the case of daughters, parents often give their own number instead, or simply ask that the opposite party wait for her call.

While *fumu xiangqin* activities are usually organised at the grassroots level by the parents involved, in recent times major *fumu xiangqin* events and festivals have also been arranged by a number of corporate sponsors in China’s major cities. In 2007 the magazine *Marriage and Family* held just such an event in Beihai Park in the inner north of Beijing. Newspaper reports indicated that more
than 1,500 parents attended over a two day period.\textsuperscript{4} They also noted that of the many unmarried adult children who were the reason for their parents’ attendance, most were between 26 and 40 years old. Most of the children had at least some tertiary education; many had Masters degrees or had studied abroad. In terms of occupation, they worked in foreign enterprises, IT, and other professional areas. It was observed that the most concerned parents were those with children over 30 years of age. However, many of the parents of the younger cohort thought it imperative to be proactive, lest they and their children leave it ‘too late’.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.png}
\caption{Parents attend a fumu xiangqin session at Zhongshan Park, Beijing in October 2006}
\end{figure}

Females make up at least 60% of the singles whose parents attend *fumu xiangqin* events. This is in line with most organised methods of matchmaking, where the proportion of women participating is usually higher than men. This phenomenon is a clear expression of the fact, common in many societies, that the single status of women beyond a certain age is of more concern to family, friends, society and to the women themselves than is the single status of men. Womanhood is defined through wifehood and motherhood more than manhood is confined through marriage and children, and thus the issue of the single female is one which raises fundamental issues of identity and role. In addition, the biological limitations which render conception and childbirth more difficult as a woman ages introduces a stronger sense of urgency. The reproductive imperative may explain the general preponderance of parents attending *fumu xiangqin* on behalf of daughters rather than sons. In the future, the proportion of parents attending on behalf of male children may increase. The introduction of the one-child policy is generally accepted to have had an effect on gender ratios, leading to the registration of a greater ratio of male to female children than is considered natural. As these only-children reach an age at which their single status causes their urban parents substantial concern, it is possible that men will be as well represented as women at matchmaking events such as these.

*Issues with fumu xiangqin*

The success rate of *fumu xiangqin* is extremely low. Some of the main reasons for this are that parents frequently participate in such exercises without telling their children, that many of the children who know their parents are engaging in such activities do not think this is an appropriate way to find a partner, and that parents and children tend to have divergent opinions when it comes to what makes an ideal partner.
Most of the parents I spoke to while attending a *fumu xiangqin* session in central Beijing indicated that their children did not know they were there. Quite a few were sure that their children would be unhappy if they realised what they were doing. One article in the popular press discussing the almost meteoric rise of *fumu xiangqin* in the city of Nanjing said that the adult children who were the subjects of this activity sometimes acquiesced, accepted, and even came along to the sessions, but most frequently they resisted it.  

Of the seventy high-status women I interviewed, only three were aware that their parents had attended a *fumu xiangqin* session. This was out of 45 women who were not currently married, of whom 20 did not have a boyfriend or partner. Given the propensity for parents to attend these events without notifying their children, it is probable that the proportion of parents attending is in fact higher.

Of the three interviewees who reported that their parents had engaged in such activities, none indicated that there had been a tangible positive outcome. In two cases, the interviewees expressed their displeasure with their parents’ actions by refusing to meet the men their parents had picked out. In the third, there was acceptance and even some enthusiasm: when I asked Joanne Ying, 31, if she had felt much pressure from her family to get married soon, she nodded and said, “yes… I don’t know if you have heard, there is a group of parents who often go to parks in Beijing to try and find someone for their children. My parents have gone a few times. I did meet one of them, but it didn’t work out.” Joanne explained that her mother attended the *fumu xiangqin* activities at Zhongshan Park, and remarked that “they also have them at Yiheyuan and at another park to the South.” I asked what her response was to

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her parents taking placards and personal information to a park to find a partner for her. She said “I understand why they did that. I understand. And I did go and introduce myself to one. You know, it’s okay; I like to meet new people.”

An assumption underlying the involvement of these parents in fumu xiangqin is that they are better able to choose an appropriate mate for their children than their children are. Many parents feel that their children do not take suitable account of practical factors such as family background, socio-economic status, income, and morals. In addition, parents believe it is possible to tell whether or not a child is likely to be a good person by the behaviour and presentation of their parents – hence the value of fumu xiangqin. Such assumptions became clear through my discussions with both parents attending fumu xiangqin sessions and my interviewees generally – whether or not they had actually been the subjects of this form of matchmaking. A key problem flowing from this is that, more often than not, the adult children who are the subject of these activities do not agree with their parents’ selection of possible mates. Some of the many popular press articles on fumu xiangqin discuss this conundrum.⁶

One of my highly educated interviewees, Hannah Yao, explained that she had become one of those women whose details were laid out on placards for all to see. While he was in Beijing visiting her, Hannah’s father had gone to one of the Beijing parks at which these gatherings occur. He went three out of the four weeks he was in Beijing. Hannah did not meet any of the people whose names her father brought back, “because what parents think is good is not necessarily what their children think.” She said the parents often went for external criteria –

houses, income, education, and so on. “That's not the way we work. And our parents know this, but they still try.”

Perhaps as a result of this experience, perhaps motivated by our discussions, and certainly due to a strong personal interest in the plight of single educated women in Beijing and China, by the time of our final interview in late 2006 Hannah had begun serious research on this issue of *fumu xiangqin*. At this meeting she explained that she was planning to contribute a paper on the matter to her university’s annual collection of essays covering newsworthy issues of the year. We spoke about some of her findings. In 2007, after I had returned to Australia, Hannah forwarded me the paper. Her findings confirmed those outlined above.

Marriage agencies

Marriage agencies are relatively common in urban China. Although it is difficult to locate any sound statistics on their numbers, according to one report there were over 1,000 in-person marriage agencies in Beijing in 2004.⁷ Some of the earliest formal marriage agencies in China were those run as a public service by organisations such as the All-China Women’s Federation and by municipal governments in the early years of reform and opening up. This period also saw the rise of matchmaking as a commercial venture, and the number of agencies grew fairly rapidly in the decades that followed.⁸ However, interest in marriage agencies now appears to be on the wane. The reasons for this are twofold. First, as a result of a proliferation of unscrupulous operators in this largely unregulated space, marriage agencies have come to be associated with scams,

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scandals, poor judgements by clients and staff members, and heartbreak. A range of vastly different demographic groups have been depicted in the press as falling victim – from poorly educated male migrant workers to highly educated urban women.\(^9\) Second, the more recent rise of online dating has seriously threatened the livelihood of agencies that do not or cannot adapt to this new reality.

The in-person marriage agencies operating today have become increasingly specialised businesses that are generally designed to serve one or more specific demographic groups. Many target high earning and highly educated men and women, who are best able to pay for what can be hugely expensive services.\(^10\) For example, the Shenzhen Daily reported that a marriage agency in Guangzhou, which aimed to find spouses for millionaires, charged 18,000 RMB per “successful pairing.”\(^11\) In Nanjing, fees as high as 600,000 RMB were reportedly charged for the planning and execution of a tailored spouse-finding process by a team of experts spanning a range of fields.\(^12\) Another agency in Nanjing, claiming to be a ‘marriage agency for aristocrats’ (贵族婚介), separated their registered clients into three categories of aristocrat, depending upon their height, income, and education. Each category had a differing annual membership fee, and differing levels of services as a result.\(^13\) More moderately priced agencies exist, and I spoke to the staff at a number of these – however,


these tend to be even less frequented than their more glamorous counterparts and sometimes operate as a side business alongside a more profitable enterprise.

Predictably, the agencies that target a specific group of the population usually have their premises in areas where it is well known that there is a high percentage of people falling into this nominated demographic. For example, in the Haidian district of Beijing, known for its high concentration of university students and lecturers and IT professionals, many of the dozens of marriage agencies profess to focus on white-collar professionals and the highly educated.

In terms of gender patterns in usage of marriage agencies, many commentators claim that the majority of users of in-person marriage agencies are women, and that in some cases women are said to outnumber men 10 to 1.\(^{14}\) At the non-commercial marriage agency in Beijing, run by the Beijing Women’s Association, the ratio of women to men was given as 2:1.\(^{15}\) My discussions with staff and in-person marriage agencies suggest that female members do generally outnumber male members, although at an average rate of less than 2:1.

### Online dating

Online dating is the newest major method of finding a mate. It arrived in China in the 1990s and has fast become a defining feature of the contemporary dating scene – unsurprising given the large numbers of web users in China and the

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rate at which these numbers are increasing. In a major report on dating and marriage released in early 2008, the importance of online dating as a mainstream method of matchmaking was unequivocally demonstrated. The report, *Report on the 2008 Web User’s Investigation of Love and Marriage*, asked almost two hundred thousand Chinese web users questions about their attitudes towards dating and marriage and about their actual behaviour. In response to a question about how the respondents had met their partner, if they had one, it was revealed that meeting through the internet was the second most popular way of finding a partner, with almost a third of respondents having used this method. Just under half of all respondents – partnered or otherwise – reported that they had used the internet for dating at some time.

There are various ways in which today’s Chinese can date online. The most well known options are specialised dating services, which can be broken down into formal online marriage agencies and self-directed online dating websites, online instant chat with the clear aim of finding a partner, and online instant chat used as a general tool to expand one’s social circle. The 2008 report mentioned above indicated that specialised dating services were the most popular form of internet dating. Over half of those who indicated the method they used indicated this option. Next, but a far smaller percentage, was online chat, followed by BBSs (Bulletin Board Systems) or online forums and interest-based groups such as gaming groups.

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Formal online marriage agencies mirror in-person marriage agencies. The same sorts of activities are conducted, but instead of requiring clients to visit the agency premises to fill out paperwork, have photographs taken, examine information on potential partners, or discuss issues and preferences with staff at the agency, all of this is done over the web. Online agencies such as these are widely considered to have many of the same risks associated with their in-person counterparts, and thus are able to gain less of the market.

Self-directed online dating websites are the leaders in the field of online matchmaking. These websites are similar in many respects to those that are becoming increasingly popular in Western societies – such as the international ‘match.com’ and the Australian service ‘RSVP’. The market for such services is fast growing, and use of such sites is becoming common.¹⁹ The most popular Chinese services of this nature include E-Friend Net, Baihe, and Jiayuan.²⁰ On these sites, men and women post descriptions of themselves, usually accompanied by a photograph, and by ticking boxes provide basic information

¹⁹ Anonymous, ‘中国网络婚恋市场潜力分析’, (updated 10 April 2008) http://www.qqhui.com/news/d18777.htm, accessed 11 October 2008. As an indication of the popularity of online dating, in 2006, the Shanghai-based IT industry watch group iResearch estimated that the value of the online dating ‘market’ in China was approximately 37 million RMB in 2004 and 91 million RMB in 2005. It predicted that by 2008 this would rise to 653 million RMB. Many international players have a presence in the Chinese market, running Chinese versions of their own sites or buying into online dating sites that have originated in China. For example, one of the leading European online dating sites, Meetic, purchased a 70% shares of E-Friend Net for US$20 million in July 2006. In most international self-directed online dating websites, such as match.com, there is typically a cost involved in initiating contact with another member of the site. But there is resistance in China to any charge being levied for initiation of such contact. Chinese websites have needed to take this reluctance into account when developing their business model and payment structure. Some require an initial joining fee to be paid, but have no charges for initiating contact; others have a small monthly fee but again do not charge for initiating contact; and others rely heavily on advertising or other revenue-generating activities such as social excursions and other events, as discussed above. The head of Baihe.com, Tian Fangjian, has said that this difference in attitudes towards payment “has to do with the traditional notion of ‘you don’t get something for nothing’ in the United States, and also because it is easier to pay online at US websites”. See Xiaolei Jing, ‘The Business of Love’, Beijing Review, 49/38 (2006), pp. 26-27.

²⁰ E-Friend Net (www.51friend.com) began operations in 1998 in Shanghai. It was one of the first dating sites to come online in China. According to its own data, it currently has over one million members. Male members are usually aged 22 to 45 years old and female members are mostly aged 20 to 40. The average age of all members is listed as being 29 years old. E-Friend Net prides itself as being “truly a service for white-collar professionals”. Seventy percent of its members have some sort of tertiary qualification. Baihe (www.baihe.com) claims to have acquired over 8,800,000 registered users since its commencement in May 2005. It is one of the top two online dating sites in China in terms of membership. Jiayuan (www.jiayuan.com) is another of the heavyweights. It was launched in October 2003 by two female students of Shanghai’s prestigious Fudan University. It is said that these women, both high performing students, did not have time to find a boyfriend and did not know where to begin looking. They conceived of Jiayuan as a solution to the similar problems of many of their classmates. The service is targeted at educated professionals, and pulls members from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao. Jiayuan claims that, at the beginning of 2008, it had nearly 12 million members and that it had so far led to 1.8 million people finding their husband or wife.
such as age, height, education level, and gender. Ordinarily, they also provide a brief textual description of the type of person they are looking for, and may list the age, height, education level and so on that they prefer in a partner. Clients can actively conduct searches of members of the opposite sex by setting limits around age, height, education levels and other set categories (however in China, these services tend to be designed in such a way as exclude the possibility of homosexuality). If she wishes to, a female client may run a simple search on the site for a man who is 24 to 28 years old, is over 170cm tall, and has a Bachelors degree. The website will generate a list of those who fall within these parameters. She can then read the descriptions these men have written and can initiate online contact with one or more of them. This initial online contact is usually anonymous or close to it. Clients do not post identifying data in their descriptions, and tend to limit what information is revealed in the first contact with any given individual. Due to safety reasons, women tend to be more cautious in this regard.

Online instant chat for the explicit purposes of finding someone to date is also increasingly widespread in China (the 2008 report indicated that 8.5% of people who had nominated the internet dating method they had used indicated this method). The vehicle that is used most often for this purpose is QQ. The makers of QQ claim that it has at least half a billion registered users. However, this almost certainly includes multiple registrations by individuals, as well as registrations by Chinese-speaking people who do not live in mainland China. After its launch from Shenzhen in 1998, QQ fast became the most popular free instant messenger service in China. The service has similarities with AOL chat, google chat or msn messenger. However, unlike these American tools, QQ was designed in China for Chinese people, and is used

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21 Instant chat should not be confused with internet chat rooms; it is a distinctly different way of communicating via the internet. The most well-known English language variants are msn chat and Google chat.

almost entirely by Chinese speakers. The result is that QQ has some significant differences to these other services – both in terms of the functionality of the tool and in terms of the attitudes users bring to it.

In services originating out of the United States, such as msn messenger, people tend only to chat with those they already know – or whom they have recently met by some other means. This is due in part to the structure of the service, and in part to ideas of cyber privacy and intimacy. One must ‘add‘ a person to their contact list for the two people to be able to chat. The common understanding is that one only adds a person to their contact list if they already know them. While QQ can be used like msn, that is as a tool that allows you to chat with people you already know, it is also designed to be and accepted as a way of meeting new people. Person A may log on and search a database for other people by age, location, gender and so on. Once they have found someone who fulfils their criteria, depending upon the privacy settings Person B has established, Person A may initiate a conversation with them. Generally speaking, seeking out people one does not already know is seen as entirely normal and acceptable, and most people use QQ with this understanding. As such, most members have open privacy settings, allowing strangers to initiate conversation with them. Because of this, QQ is viewed as a mechanism through which one might start a romantic involvement. Many young Chinese I spoke to – within and outside my formal interview cohort – mentioned that people “hooked up” a lot on QQ.

As well as instant chat with the specific aim of finding a partner, the online world provides many less direct methods of expanding one’s social circle, with perhaps the secondary aim of “meeting someone nice”. This includes online social circles established around common interests, such as online gaming, music, or travel. Live chat rooms or online BBSs are often the way that these
people get and stay in touch. Much as is the case in my own country, these online circles sometimes flow into ‘real life’ and thus provide opportunities to meet potential partners who share an interest. While not entirely in the same vein, online “virtual marriage” games, in which young, urban Chinese (typically high school and university students) adopt online personas who engage in fictitious marriages online, also occasionally provide a platform from which to launch real-life friendships or romances.\textsuperscript{23}

According to the 2008 web users report mentioned above, over seventy percent of those surveyed said that the major reason for using the internet for dating was that the pool of people you can meet is relatively large; more so than through a traditional marriage agency. Other responses included that they lacked the opportunity to make new friends in regular life (7.4%), they found internet dating to be time saving or efficient (6.6%), it was convenient (6.3%), it was safe and secure (4.1%), and it was cheaper than a traditional marriage agency (3.1%). Other sources indicate that many sociable white-collar professionals are drawn to online dating because of the access it provides to a range of social activities. Not only are these social activities fun, the use of multiple methods multiplies their matchmaking opportunities.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{Singles activities}

The number and type of activities specifically designed for single people to make personal connections has exploded in recent years. The growth of these activities has piggybacked on the growth of online dating, with many singles activities either run by online dating websites or affiliated in some way with


them. The growth of mass popular media, especially lifestyle magazines and websites, has also seen the capacity to promote such activities significantly expand, thus drawing a larger pool of potential participants. The 2008 report mentioned above found that 48.5% of the over 150,000 people surveyed believed that group singles activities can be effective in addressing problems with finding a partner.\(^\text{25}\) Those who were indifferent constituted 30.6% of the sample, 17.4% believed it may expand the possibilities for love, and only 3.5% “were against” such activities.\(^\text{26}\)

The singles activities that are currently run in contemporary China span the entire spectrum of social activity. One activity I attended was a murder mystery night in a bar in the central business district of Beijing. Other singles activities include social sporting events, dinner functions, short trips to local landmarks and places of interest, and singles parties. Some unexpected entities have also made forays into running singles activities. A supermarket in Beijing decided to run an activity whereby single shoppers elected to carry red baskets while shopping, rather than the regular coloured baskets, in order to denote their ‘available’ status and to facilitate conversation with other keen singles.\(^\text{27}\) The supermarket established a separate check-out for those with red baskets. This had the added ‘benefit’ of enabling those singles queuing to have time to talk. Those working at the supermarket were surprised that many lonely elderly Chinese were participating in the exercise.

Speed dating is a specific and notable sub-category of singles activities. Since the introduction of speed dating, it has increased in popularity and diversified in form. The basic idea behind speed dating is to meet many people of the

\(^{26}\) Ibid.
opposite sex in one set time period, in a coordinated fashion and according to simple fixed rules. Speed dating first appeared in cosmopolitan Shanghai in the early 2000s. Inspired by Sex in the City and other American sitcoms popular in China’s cities, companies such as ‘color8th’ were established for the express purpose of running speed dating events. Beijing was another city that quickly came into contact with speed dating. For example, the ‘I Love Chocolate Club’ in Beijing has been holding events since at least 2003.

For those who find speed dating a little too rushed, singles dinner parties are one available alternative. There is less emphasis on speed and more on spending ‘quality time’ with new acquaintances, with the hope that love might grow. Those who are keen to participate register their details with the organiser, again usually a matchmaking service of some type. The organiser then examines the details of those who have registered and sorts them into groups according to interests, age, gender, education and the like. The organiser then books tables at nice restaurants in the area for these groups, usually numbering around eight people. Emails are sent to the attendees advising them of where to turn up and when. A representative of the organiser may be present to greet guests, but otherwise the dinner and conversation are generally unmediated. A fee is paid to the organiser for the service.

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While singles dinner parties are generally smaller affairs and involve sit-down meals and a more intimate atmosphere, larger, more outgoing singles parties involving drinking, dancing and socialising have become places to be seen among the elites of Beijing, Shanghai, and other major urban centres. I arrived in Beijing on one of my fieldwork trips shortly before a “top 1,000 singles in Beijing” party hosted by the internationally known *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Clearly not counted among the capital’s top 1,000 single men and women, I was unable to secure an invitation to the big event. Nonetheless, I was able to speak to one of the organisers at *Cosmopolitan*. Ms Li said that between 1,200 and 1,300 people were invited; the invited men were aged 28 to 40 and the women were between 25 and 35 years of age. Each invitee needed to have at least a Bachelors degree and have stable work and a stable income. Those who worked in foreign enterprises were especially welcome. Invitees included the “top 100 bachelors” as listed in a previous issue of *Cosmopolitan* that year, and the “top 100 single ladies” showcased in the parallel men’s magazine, *Esquire*. Ms Li explained that it was not necessary for the organisers to actively play matchmaker; their main role was simply to get the guests to attend.

While there are a number of such events targeted at millionaires and socialites, there is also a range of less glamorous events held on a regular and semi-regular basis in urban China. These are often targeted towards white-collar men and women and simply held at bars or function centres.

Singles festivals and excursions are held to bring like-minded singles together to participate in activities that they enjoy is the best way to break the ice and

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31 Interview with Ms Li, marketing manager of China’s *Cosmopolitan* magazine, November 2006.
32 See for example Anonymous, ‘From Communist Party To Rich-Only Matchmaking Party’, *Reuters Online*, (updated 5 November 2007) [http://www.reuters.com/article/oddlyEnoughNews/idUSN0521643420071105](http://www.reuters.com/article/oddlyEnoughNews/idUSN0521643420071105), accessed 27 October 2008. This article reports that “twenty Chinese men, including several on the country's richest list, paid $8,000 a head to attend a matchmaking party with 30 'single young beauties'.” The party, it went on to say, was held at a luxury European-style villa in Shanghai, with guests arriving in stretch limousines and getting the full red-carpet treatment.
make people feel comfortable, which, in turn, increase their chances of developing new friendships and relationships. Some events are like a more relaxed speed dating session. For example, in late 2005 in Beijing, a singles ‘festival’ was run by the internet dating service E-friend Net at Zhongshan park (notably also the site of regular *fumu xiangqin* activities), and around 5,000 people were said to attend. It was reported that over two-thirds were women. In 2006 the online dating service UF98 held a singles festival in a café and bar strip of Beijing that included magicians, ‘how to host a murder’ games, chess, darts, clay modelling, and a range of other group activities. One attendee was quoted as saying:

Through the day’s events I met quite a few people, and became good friends with some guys. Since then we have often been in touch with each other, and if we have free time we go out for a coffee and a chat… Now we’ll let nature take its course.

There are a number of bars, pubs and other licensed establishments in Beijing and across China that are particularly oriented toward attracting single patrons. At these venues, patrons may simply sit and drink, directly initiate conversations with others, enlist the bar staff to make introductions for them, and leave messages for other patrons. One such bar, 百龄坛酒吧 (‘Altar of a hundred ages bar’), was reported on Xinhua’s internet news service as having

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35 See for example Anonymous, ‘体验郑州单身酒吧：只出售浪漫 不包办爱情’, (updated 4 August 2005)
3,000 customers who had registered with them as seeking partners. The bar claimed that it had already facilitated dozens of pairings of happy couples.\(^{36}\)

The chosen avenues for finding a mate

From this range of possibilities, what methods of finding a potential mate were used by the seventy high-income and highly educated Beijing women I interviewed? And were any of these methods particularly successful?

Most highly educated interviewees said that they had either asked for or accepted the introductions of others, had used the internet, or had engaged in general group activities – usually as an extension of their existing circle of friends or affiliated with their educational institution – that might lead to a romantic pairing. The responses of the high-income interviewees were not dissimilar. Again they had tried introductions by others and internet dating, but in general this group was more open to attending activities that were for single people who did not otherwise have any links to each other.

In terms of actually meeting a lasting partner, of the 25 women in each group who were in a relationship, 14 women in the high-income group stated that they had met their partners while one or both of them were studying, with the comparable figure in the highly educated group being 11 women. A number of other women who were not currently in a relationship mentioned that they had met previous boyfriends while studying. The percentage of interviewees meeting partners while studying was consistent across all age groups – it was not merely the case that all the younger women were dating men from their

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recent university years and the middle-aged women were not. Further, it was not merely that many of them married immediately after graduation, although some did. Many couples graduated and then worked for years before eventually tying the knot. When speaking with my interviewees about my perception that many professional Chinese women seemed to have met their husbands in university, one, 38-year-old Kristina Tang exclaimed:

Yes! You are absolutely right! It’s quite funny actually – a while ago someone mentioned the same thing to me and I thought “really?” Then I calculated what the case was with my ex-classmates from university. I worked out that one hadn’t got married yet, another one married his high school classmate, and all the rest married someone they met in university.  

She herself had been married for over ten years, and met her husband whilst studying at university fifteen years ago. Other interviewees of a similar age to Kristina had similar experiences. Dorothy Sun, an academic, met her husband in 1985 and married him in 1987. They were both students in Beijing. She said “I was 24, doing my Masters at [that university] and as soon as I graduated we got married. We had known each other just shy of two years.” Louise Hua, an academic six years older than Dorothy, also met her husband at university and married him immediately after graduating with her Masters degree. Both did not go on to do their PhDs immediately, but rather completed them ten or fifteen years later.

As for recent university-based partnering, Annette Luo, a 24-year-old management accountant at an international firm in Beijing, met her serious boyfriend while they were both in Australia studying for their Masters degrees. Bianca Jing and her husband of two years met while they were both research

37 Interview WC 051228.
students in computer science. Lauren Lai, a 28-year-old PhD student, met her husband while they were both studying for their Masters degrees at the university in the capital of their home province. While dating they moved to Beijing to do their PhDs – hers in sociology and his in legal studies – and married during this time.

Among the highly educated women, the second most likely way of meeting a mate was being introduced to men by friends and colleagues. Natasha Shi, a PhD student, was introduced to her boyfriend by her roommate.38 She said that before she met this boyfriend, friends, family and others had constantly been trying to set her up with man after man. “But none became serious, so my parents didn’t give me too much pressure about it. From this perspective I am lucky for a girl my age.” When she first met this man, who has now become her husband, she was not terribly interested in him – she found him to be too dark-skinned. But after much persistence on the part of her roommate, who explained that this man was a good man with a fabulous sense of humour, Natasha agreed to see him again. Tanya Kang, a researcher and social commentator, met her husband at a party over twenty years ago. She was formally introduced by a mutual friend. At the time she was almost 30 years old; he was 33. Again, Tanya was not too interested in her husband the first time they met – in fact, when asked by the introducer what she thought of him, she responded that she did not even remember him. Nonetheless, hearing he was keen she agreed to meet him a second time, and it went from there. At the time of our interview, university lecturer Rachel Chan had been dating a man for about 6 months, and they had fixed plans to marry. She was an academic and he was an office worker with a Masters Degree, and they had met through friends. Of their meeting, Rachel said, “the range, the people you know, is very narrow. You need your friends to introduce you.”

38 Interview ED 050416N.
Interestingly, direct introductions by others did not play a major role in matchmaking in the high-income group. Unlike the highly educated cohort, the second most popular way of having found a partner among this group was actually through childhood and family friends. Ava Zhong had been married for nearly ten years to a family friend: "We knew each other from when we were very young. His mum and my mum were classmates together at university – actually at Bei Da [Beijing University]. So our family background is very similar."

Janine Jin, a lawyer, was about to marry "the older brother of the classmate I used to sit next to, my desk-mate from school." She said that she had not seen this man for many years, but then ran into him in 2004. Stacey Zhu, who worked in the international media, married a classmate from junior high school, whom she reconnected with after the end of a long relationship in 2006.

Finding a partner through pre-existing professional networks was successful for only a handful of the women I spoke to, and was more prevalent in the high income sub-set than the highly educated. When I met Cherie Cao, a woman in her early thirties who worked in the media industry, she was dating a man she had met through her work. He did not work in the same company as her, but was active in the same professional circles. Ruth Hu, who was in her late twenties, actually met someone at work – she and her fiancé both worked for a major logistics company in Shanghai when they started dating. He had since moved on to a new organisation and both had relocated to Beijing.

Online methods of matchmaking had a definite presence amongst my interviewees, particularly among those who were 30 years of age or younger. Eighty percent of those in this age group had either used the internet as a way of finding a partner or said they would definitely consider it. However, despite the fact that my interviewees considered it a common and acceptable way to
find new male friends and boyfriends, the method was not so successful in leading to long-term commitments. Jasmine Wei was one of the high-income women I spoke to who had used the internet to find a partner. When we first met in 2005, in response to my question on whether she had a boyfriend at present, she replied “No. I just broke up with one. And I still haven’t found the next one.” They had been together for over a year, and they had met on the internet. I mentioned to her that it seemed as if many people used the internet for dating these days, including QQ and so on. Jasmine said “Right, QQ, msn… Because these days, with our work, our social circles are very small. You go to work, you come home. You’re very busy. There just isn’t any opportunity to meet anyone.” Jasmine said that when it came to looking for love in this way, “when I first started I was really unsure. But there’s no way around it. My family, because I was getting quite old, gave me a lot of pressure. …. So I just got on the internet.” Perhaps as a sign of the shifting fortunes of matchmaking methods in China, when I asked if she had ever thought about going to a marriage agency she said no, “I don’t like that kind of thing,” and remarked on the untrustworthiness and clumsiness of such an approach. From the highly educated group, Hannah Yao was one woman who had used QQ to meet men, and it led to a number of dates. However, in the end she felt that without the kind of knowledge about the opposite party that came from having mutual friends, growing up in the same place, or having some other longstanding or reliable connection, she did not feel comfortable proceeding with a relationship.

Other potential methods of finding a mate had limited currency among interviewees. While one woman had found a partner through an organised singles activity, none had found a partner through singles bars, dinner parties, or excursions, even though over half of the single women within the high-income group in particular said that they occasionally attended some or all of these.
Where women from both the high-income and the highly educated groups had failed to find suitable partners through their own actions, and seemed unwilling to settle for people or relationships not consistent with their desires, their parents often decided that it was time to increase their involvement in this part of their child’s lives. I previously mentioned that there were three women who knew their parents had participated in *fumu xiangqin* activities on their behalf. As mentioned, none had experienced any success with this method – and while all understood, at least intellectually, why their parents had taken these steps, none of them was pleased. Not all parents chose *fumu xiangqin* as their method of involvement, however. Most interviewees who had been single in their mid 20s and beyond commented that their parents had made many attempts to introduce potential husbands to them.

*Campus courtship: the defining trope*

Many women in both groups established long-term relationships while studying, and it is useful to ask why. It is an especially interesting question given that for decades in China so-called ‘management provisions’ effectively banned the marriage of undergraduate university students to anyone. These Ministry of Education provisions were to some extent open to interpretation by universities and other institutes of higher education. However, in reality they were almost universally seen as an effective ban.

For the state and the universities, the reasoning behind the existence of these provisions was simple: students came to university to learn, not to engage in distracting frivolities like romance and courtship. In a nation where basic education was far from universal, higher education was seen as a rare state-
funded opportunity. Undergraduate students were expected to take this opportunity seriously, and unlike tertiary institutions in decadent capitalist nations, Chinese universities were not to become forums for wanton flirtation and loose sexual experimentation.

These top-down provisions were supplemented by a range of regulations invoked at the level of the individual tertiary institution. Each institution set regulations of varying degrees of tightness, with rules particularly strict after the demonstrations of the spring of 1989. Beijing University, for example, banned hugging and kissing on campus in October 1991, and introduced a system of warnings and fines in order to make the regulation effective.39

Borge Bakken discusses the enforcement of such regulations relating to the romantic lives of students in the context of state control and a concern with policing social boundaries. Within both traditional and modern China, he argues, ‘disorderly sexuality’ or ‘sex out of place’ were seen to bear a direct threat on the maintenance of social order within society.40 This argument is supported by a great deal of scholarship on China discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, ranging from analyses of prostitution to the New Woman and to “bare-stick” bachelors.41

The decades-old state provisions banning students’ romantic involvements were officially rescinded by the Chinese Ministry of Education on March 29,

2005. Their removal saw the end of the nationwide legal and regulatory involvement of the state in the romantic lives of literally millions of young Chinese adults, and opened the door to a new era of possibilities for young men and women.

There were solid legal reasons for this move. These were primarily grounded in the conflict between these regulations and the more authoritative Marriage Law of the People’s Republic of China. The first point at issue was that the Marriage Law states that the legal marrying age for men is 22 and for women is 20. The case had been that the universities, by threatening to expel students who married, had made it virtually impossible for undergraduate students who had reached these ages to exercise their fundamental legal right. The second point at issue was that since amendments were made to the 1980 version of the national Marriage Law in 2003, work units (danwei) were no longer able to have a final say about the marriages of the people they employed. Under the Chinese administrative system, every university counted as a danwei, and thus while prior to 2003 universities had had some legal grounds allowing them to inhibit the marriages of their students and staff, the 2003 changes stripped them of these grounds.

Aside from these legal reasons for ending the ban, it is also possible that the state was influenced in its decision by the decline in the marriage rate and the presence of challenges to universality of the institution more broadly. Provisions such as these contributed to delays in marriage and precluded many educated young men and women from entering into what is generally considered a socially stabilising institution.

Discussions with students and academics at several universities in Beijing have led me to believe that apart from a temporary spike in the numbers of students
getting married after the lifting of the ban, the proportion of undergraduates marrying has not greatly increased. However, despite the low numbers of men and women getting married while actually studying, the role of universities as sites of romance in the courtship culture of modern urban China is very strong. Why is it that university campuses hold such a prominent position as sites of romance for the middle- and upper-classes in China? Why is it that so many men and women from these classes, including my interviewees, marry classmates rather than colleagues and contacts made during their working lives? There are a number of reasons.

One practical reason, spoken of by many of the women I interviewed, was that their entrance into campus life saw the beginning of a new period in their lives. Given the harsh competition which drives the Chinese secondary school system, any student who made it into a university is more likely than not to have spent the previous few years ensconced in study—either in class for up to six long days per week, or under the watchful eyes of their parents on evenings and weekends. In most cases, upper secondary students in particular are spared all other chores and tasks as well as more enjoyable distractions throughout these years. By comparison, university was an experience in unparalleled freedom. And not only did they have a great deal of free time for the first time in years, they had a large number of new friends from around the country to spend that free time with. Once their work lives began, free time became a much scarcer commodity, and circles shrank.

Another reason, also commonly expressed by my interviewees, was that they were simply more idealistic then. A number remarked that they were young,

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42 In the months and even weeks following March 29, 2005, many young student couples who had been in serious relationships for some time, and who had previously found themselves threatened with expulsion if they married, took the opportunity to tie the knot. Local and national media coverage of these weddings was extensive. Many people raised the question of the practicality of marrying while located on a university campus. The message was: universities were not built for married couples; why not wait until you have graduated before getting married?
were in an environment where lofty ideals and passions were encouraged, and were attracted to young men with whom they shared such ideals and passions. The concrete material and practical concerns prevalent in the partnering decisions of older women acted less as inhibitors during this period.

A third reason for universities being sites of romance and courtship is the increase in the numbers of Chinese who are going to university. Compounding this is a marked increase in those who stay on for two-year Masters programs and even three- or four- year PhDs. The extended reach of higher education, and the extension of time spent receiving it, means that more people are on campus, and increasingly for a longer period. The presence in particular of more men and women in their mid to late 20s undoubtedly adds to the courtship culture, given that this is considered a prime time for finding a partner in China.

A fourth reason, increasingly common as the numbers and ages of students have increased, is the presence of both informal and formal matchmaking mechanisms on Chinese campuses. Since the removal of the Ministry of Education regulations, some commercial marriage agencies have begun to post advertisements on campus noticeboards. Newspapers in Nanjing reported on this phenomenon as early as April 2005. Advertisers in general targeted “beautiful, talented young women” and boasted that among their members were men with overseas educations, who had good positions in the government, who were “white-collar elites”, and who earned between 60,000 and 1 million RMB per year (then about 10,000 to 160,000 Australian dollars per year, and easily within the top income bracket in China). The Yangzi Evening Standard reported that while many male students sighed and rolledii

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their eyes when they saw these kinds of notices, female students in general were more accepting.44

In addition to these relatively new forays by private companies into the campus matchmaking realm, other more established and somewhat less formal methods of matchmaking exist. One stalwart is the Piebridge advertisement. Piebridge advertisements take their name and content from an old Chinese folk story, which tells of two lovers who were separated by impossible circumstances, and only allowed to meet on a magical bridge made of magpies that appeared across the sky when the moon was full. Piebridge advertisements are advertisements placed by men and women (or occasionally friends or relatives of these men and women) looking for partners. Once written on paper and posted on boards, piebridge ads today usually come in the form of postings on BBSs, ever present in Chinese campus culture. A simple check on the Beijing University BBS, accessed by up to 25,000 at a time (I have personally seen the numbers that high), shows scores of new postings daily. A further mechanism for finding a partner on campus is the series of organised events run by student clubs and by the university. Some of these, especially those for the older, postgraduate students, are openly understood to have a matchmaking function.45 These cross over with the ‘singles activities’ category discussed above.

A final factor could be that the traditional adage mendang hudui (matching doors and windows), the idea that couples should have similar status backgrounds, continues to hold sway in twenty-first century China as it does in many other countries and cultures. A university might be just the place to find an appropriately well-educated, middle-class person to date. And if you are a

44 Ibid.
45 Interview with 6 postgraduate students at Renmin Daxue, Beijing in June 2005.
young woman strategising for a future life, this could be the perfect opportunity to find a suitable partner.

Put together, these circumstances and methods combine to give a matchmaking ‘flavour’ to university campuses throughout China. Therefore, while some of my interviewees met their partners through introductions, family or hometown connections, and more recently the internet, a larger proportion met their partners while studying. Nevertheless, a number of the women I spoke to had tried many methods of finding a partner, including campus courtship, and still had had no success.

**Alternative lifestyles**

For those women who failed to find a partner through any of these mechanisms, or who were simply not interested in settling down or re-partnering after a marriage had ended, what personal life options were available and what options were explored? A number of possibilities highlight the changing opportunities and mores within the subculture of high-status women (and men) in China.

While marriage continues to be the norm and while society continues to be structured around this, the growth in the numbers of single adult men and women in China in recent years has led to a number of social changes. The design and use of private space is one example. The early years of this century have seen the rise of apartment complexes that are specifically for single people – with some reserved for single women.46 The existence of such

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46 Articles that discuss this development include: Brook Larmer, ‘The Cost of Freedom: In Booming Coastal Cities like Shanghai, Pricey New Apartments are Being Snapped Up by Young, Single Chinese Women Looking to Have a
apartments, usually one-bedroom, reflect the rise in the numbers of women who are marrying later, who are not marrying at all, or who are divorcees. They also speak to the economic independence of these women. The women purchasing these apartments appeared to feel that while they may be doing without some of the commonly accepted features of the life of a mature, responsible adult woman, they did not wish to do without all of these features. They were independently capable of ensuring their own security and stability through purchasing a space of their own. Single women, of course, also purchased their own housing in regular apartment complexes.

The media contains a number of reports on women who have found that owning one’s own home could be a liability when it came to being considered desirable as a potential girlfriend or wife. Some men, apparently, find this degree of economic independence threatening, fearful that it will undermine the gender balance within a potential relationship. 47 Many of the high-status women I interviewed, particularly the high-income women, own their own homes. This includes Cherie Cao, Jasmine Wei, Elizabeth Ren, Christy Liang, and Janine Jin. Several of the single home-owning interviewees acknowledged that women like themselves sometimes suffered discrimination in the dating scene due to their obvious signs of achievement and economic independence. 48

As mentioned in Chapter 4, firm statistics on homosexuality in China are not available. That said, figures in the tens of millions are commonly given, and it is


48 An example is Jasmine Wei. Interview WC 050524.
generally accepted that options for fulfilling romantic desires beyond the confines of heterosexual marriage are increasingly being explored among some segments of the Chinese population. Only one of my interviewees raised the topic of lesbianism, and demonstrated an open and accepting attitude towards it. Jasmine Wei, a 28-year-old real estate salesperson, said that she knew a lot of lesbian women and that in some ways she understood the appeal. Other highly educated and high-income Chinese men and women with whom I have spoken have told me stories of classmates, friends, and colleagues who are either lesbian or bisexual. It was only in 2001 that homosexuality was removed from the state-sanctioned list of mental disorders.\footnote{Li Heng, ‘Mental Disorder Redefined, Homosexuality Excluded ’, People’s Daily Online (updated 12 March 2001) \url{http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200103/12/eng20010312_64791.html}, accessed 22 April 2009.} As is the case in many other countries, there is still discrimination directed towards those engaging in non-heterosexual activities. While it is unlikely that this will change in the immediate future, it is nonetheless likely that discourses encouraging self-fulfilment, sexual exploration and being true to one’s personal desires, combined with the state’s condoning of non-reproductive sex brought to the fore by the introduction of the one-child policy, will lead to continued exploration of this space and the continued blurring of boundaries.

Three of the women I interviewed were divorced. Of those who were married, and those yet to marry, it is likely that more still will one day find themselves in this situation. Fortunately for these women, alongside the increasing numbers of divorced women in China’s cities, there has been a concomitant change in the way that these women are perceived. Once almost universally frowned upon, divorced women are now more accepted. This has been a change effected over several decades, in part fuelled by changes to the legal framework for marriage and also in part due to the growing economic independence of women. As noted in Chapter 2, already in the late 1980s
female authors were writing about being surrounded by divorcees and of being regularly asked, “how come you aren’t divorced yet?” As some of my high-status interviewees, particularly the high-income women, noted, they are not so worried about their children growing up as part of a split family, as more and more homes are experiencing divorce and as divorce increasingly comes to be seen in the popular media as something quite normal. As was mentioned in Chapter 6, Mary Zhou was extremely grateful for television programs that made her daughter feel more comfortable with being the child of divorced parents.

The possibility of choosing to have a child while single has been raised earlier in this dissertation in the narratives of a number of my interviewees. The influence of the market economy here is strong. The increasing economic independence of women has been a factor in turning single motherhood into something that is perceived to be manageable. In addition, as more and more services have become purchasable, many women are of the view that it is not necessary to marry in order to have someone to do the electrical, plumbing, and heavy physical work around the home, since it is now possible to buy most of the services that would have been expected of a husband. However, single motherhood that is not directly the result of a marriage that has ended is not yet widespread in China. While increasingly considered and discussed by women who are in a position to afford it, these women are cognisant of the difficulties and the questions that would arise if they became pregnant in an unmarried state and if they subsequently raised a child on their own. This was part of the reason why Penny Ang was putting a joke out among her friends to test the waters and to try to get them to understand that she would be “not that strange” in possibly one day having a child without a husband or partner.

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All of the above options, except for the final one, have been made more feasible by the separation of sex from reproduction discussed in Chapter 1.\textsuperscript{51} Even delaying or forgoing marriage and buying a home of one’s own is related to this development, as women are able to make this choice with the knowledge that it does not mean they have to refrain from flirtation, dating, or physical affection. Many high-status urban women believe that such behaviour does not have to lead to marriage or even be grounded in love, and can be engaged in with women as well as men.

\section*{Conclusion}

High-status urban Chinese women are increasingly active in both imagining and enacting their romantic identities and their personal desires. The vast majority of the women I interviewed wanted to have a partner with whom to experience life, or at least a significant period of it. The desire to find a mate who could be a genuine emotional partner has encouraged women to be active in the matchmaking process, as this chapter has shown. That university campuses are prime locations for finding a mate suggests, among other things, a desire to find someone with whom one has had similar experiences, who has similar interests, and who a shares a similar sense of the potential of one’s life project. The range of other matchmaking methods employed by my interviewees show that those left single at the end of the day were not in this state due to a lack of effort on their part. This is contrary to some views

\textsuperscript{51} In particular I referred to the ideas of Pan Suiming, \textit{Sexuality in China}, trans. Sexuality Southeast Asian Consortium on Gender, and Health (Nakornpathom: Southeast Asian Consortium on Gender, Sexuality and Health, 2005) and Anthony Giddens, \textit{The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies} (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992). If women like Penny Ang decide to use artificial insemination in their quest to become mothers, this process is taken a step further, and reproduction itself becomes separated from sex – a future flagged by Giddens in the above work.
reflected in the media that suggest that these women do not make time for their private lives or finding a partner.

The plethora of matchmaking methods available, and the presence of a campus courtship culture, indicate that single women and men in China are not in the same situation as single Japanese men and women, who face a serious decline in arranged marriages without a functioning marriage market coming into effect. The marriage market for urban middle-class Chinese is rapidly expanding and diversifying, and is not so weak that it can be identified as the cause of any disproportionate persistence of single statuses among these women.

For those high-status urban Chinese women who do not find a partner who matches their requirements, or who do not wish to find a partner at all, an increasing range of lifestyles is available. While a degree of stigma remains attached to living some of these options, such as divorce or open lesbianism, this stigma appears to have decreased since the beginning of the reform era. While these non-normative personal arrangements may in part have become more possible due to the rise of ‘plastic sexuality’, and perhaps a related reassessment of the perfect balance between romance, companionship, and sexual pleasure, within my interviewee sample it is largely only the high-income women who have taken up these options. This indicates that economic independence is a significant factor in being able to openly choose these possibilities.

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Chapter 8: Conclusion

“I think things change, and society is changing.
Women like me, we are changing people’s views.”

- Jean Xue¹

This dissertation has explored two lines of enquiry. The first relates to whether or not high status, educationally or economically, has a negative effect on a Chinese woman’s ability to get married. The second relates to the kinds of romantic options open to high-status Chinese women, the choices they make, and why. This study has, in part, been a study of comparisons: between discourse and experience, and between the experiences of women in two different high-status groups.

In answering these questions, this study has contributed to an understanding of contemporary urban Chinese society and social change in two important ways: it has explored current sexual, gender, and relationship norms, including the relationship between media representations and these changing norms; and it has broadened our understanding of the role of the educated middle class in the process of changing gender norms, sexual practices, and relationships in China.

¹ Interview WC060206.
**Norms, ideals, and discourses**

As was observed, women of high status are depicted in the media and popular opinion as being disproportionately single. While sharing this same broad characterisation, the discourse about highly educated women and marriage is more clearly negative than that regarding high-income women. The former discourse suggests that such women are single because men find them undesirable wives and girlfriends, and because many women refuse to marry men who are not better educated than they are. The latter discourse suggests that high-income women focus too much on their careers and do not place a high priority on finding a husband or having children, but perhaps could accomplish these if they wanted to.

Current gender norms and conceptions of ideal mates provide an important backdrop for understanding why it is that these women in particular might be viewed as unmarriageable, and why this calls into question their gender identity, leaving them to at times be depicted as a ‘Third Sex’. Chapter 3 demonstrated that overall mate preference ideals tend towards strong, wealthy, educated men and beautiful, young, soft women. There is a parallel desire for both romantic attachment and more practical economic suitability. My findings in this regard match those of others who have explored this issue, including Yan Yunxiang, James Farrer, and William Jankowiak.

An underlying principle guiding mate selection is that men should not marry women who are superior to them in social or economic status. It is understandable, then, that there is a popular (though erroneous) assumption that these women are far more likely to remain unmarried than other less high-achieving women.
This assumption has consequences in terms of the identities publicly ascribed to these women. Chapters 1 and 2 showed that the concept of the virtuous wife, good mother (xianqi liangmu) has played an important continuing role in ideals around womanhood. While this concept has been re-interpreted by many, as Kathleen Erwin found in her study of women in 1990s Shanghai, the core idea that motherhood and wifehood are essential to womanhood has remained. This is clear from the way the high-status women framed their stories in Chapters 5 and 6, and most particularly evident in the stories of members of the highly educated group. When these women used the words “normal” and “traditional” women and sought to highlight their similarities with these models, they spoke of their loyalty, filiality, and desire to be good mothers and wives. The centrality of terms like “normal woman” demonstrates that the power of gender norms that relate roles, duties and obligations to biological differences remains strong in contemporary urban China. The findings of this study are in this respect in line with the research conducted by Harriet Evans, Emily Honig, Gail Hershatter, and Margaret K. Woo on other periods of modern Chinese history.

The stories that are perpetuated by the media in the discourses about high-status women and marriage are of interest to Chinese readers as amusing distractions from their ordinary lives. Popular magazines and websites that make money from advertising therefore have an interest in carrying such stories, regardless of their accuracy. From a political perspective, one could claim that media commentary around high-status women and marriage is part of a critique of the nature and rate of social change in contemporary China, or an attempt to enforce some sort of moral order in the face of perceived transgressions of social norms. This latter explanation aligns with the ‘moral panic’ argument originally put forward by Stanley Cohen and discussed in...
Chapters 1 and 3. While the extent to which real panic is present is debatable, the terms and constructs Cohen puts forward provide useful tools for examining the case of high status women. The folk devils, in this case, are these women who are perceived to not be conforming to expectations about their roles as proper women, located safety within the bounds of a nuclear family. Such an explanation also picks up on the connection between the figurative Chinese woman and the state of the Chinese nation, explored in research conducted by Gail Hershatter and Louise Edwards among others. As reforms have set in and the pace of social and economic change in China’s cities is accelerating, anxieties about various individuals’ and groups’ proper place might on some level be reflective of concerns about the potential instability of the nation.

But why does there appear to be more public and media discussion of the personal lives of highly educated women than high-income women? First, the curiosity factor appears to be stronger for highly educated women than for high-income women. There is an apparent assumption that the lifestyles of high-income women approximate a ‘known’ model of femininity or womanhood, that of the fashionable, sexually aware Western working woman. But a similar frame does not exist for highly educated women, and this greater degree of uncertainty generates more rumours. Second, from a pragmatic perspective, there is some acceptance that having a wife with a high income could be a blessing, bringing the comforts of a materially rich life. The broader media commentary on white-collar and high-income women frequently points to their love of fashion and impeccable grooming. A wife with a high education does not necessarily have such an image, or the material benefits. Instead they are perceived in the media as at risk of presenting a husband with a potentially unwanted intellectual challenge at home.
Experience, emotion, and action

My fieldwork research has shown that, contrary to the stereotype portrayed in the discourses, a high proportion of highly educated and high-income women are married or in serious relationships. Chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation probed the romantic desires and decisions of members of the highly educated and high-income groups, examining the factors that affect their decision-making and the ways in which they describe and justify their personal life courses. These chapters showed that, while they are far from the unfeminine spinsters depicted in the discourse, the personal life courses of the two groups of elite women do show some differences from what Chapter 4 showed to be the norm. Women in the highly educated and high-income groups are far less likely to be in a state of first marriage than Beijing women of a similar age.

This dissertation has demonstrated that these variations from the norm are a consequence of several interrelated factors. First, the time spent studying or establishing a career tends to delay marriage and motherhood, if that is what is sought. Second, changing views on love and 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.

The first of these findings is consistent with the conclusions of international research on marriage entry patterns. As Chapter 1 explained, researchers such as Hans-Peter Blossfeld, James Raymo and Robert Retherford have found that increased education levels generally lead to increases in average marriage ages. The data in Chapter 4 on the marital statuses of Beijing female
postgraduates is in line with this. The high-status women of my study placed significant value on their careers, and were willing to delay attainment of goals in their personal lives in order to make headway in their professional lives and to take their formal education as far as they could. They were aware of duties expected of wives that might be difficult to fulfil while they had other time-consuming priorities. For women seeking to complete PhDs, run successful businesses, or reach high positions on the corporate ladder, the period of career establishment was prolonged.

Women of both high-status groups exhibited views on love and relationships that encouraged them to seek emotional satisfaction in relationships tailored to their needs, rather than marriage for the sake of it. While they at times used the term ‘Mr. Right’, it was not simply Prince Charming that they were looking for, but rather the right kind of relationship. This relationship required a high degree of satisfaction on the three related axes discussed by William Jankowiak and Thomas Paladino and others: romantic passion, companionship, and sexual satisfaction. Many women, especially those who had spent time living abroad or who otherwise had a high degree of international exposure, expressed ideas of relationships that were akin to that proposed by Anthony Giddens as a “pure relationship”: that is, truly democratic relationships, based on mutual emotional satisfaction, and lasting only as long as this satisfaction endures. Being with someone but not rushing into a marriage with them, or being married to someone but not being afraid to divorce, became options opened up by this sort of thinking.

The quest for emotional satisfaction within one’s romantic life was part of a growing consciousness among these women – the idea that their life was truly

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their to plan, live, and find fulfilment in. Again it is possible to relate such an observation to those made by Giddens and other like-minded social theorists, who highlight a growing self-reflexivity in high modernity. As noted in Chapter 5, such scholars argue that life is a project always in the making, and one that is in the hands of the individual and not controlled by external forces that may have played determining roles in the past.4 This outlook was demonstrated particularly, but not exclusively, by the high-income women in this study. In seeing themselves as independently capable, with a vision for their future and a plan for how they were going to achieve it, they cast themselves in the mould of authors of their lives. Most wanted marriage and children, and while these may not have been the first goals they went about achieving in their adult lives, they had strategies in place to try to ensure that these were goals they eventually met.

For both the highly educated and high-income women the desire for an emotionally satisfying relationship coupled with a sense of control over their own lives meant that they took an active role in attempting to find an appropriate mate. As demonstrated in Chapter 7, they were not faced with a situation similar to that described in the Japanese context, whereby arranged marriages were no longer common but a functioning marriage market had not emerged to fill the gap.5 Instead, a plethora of matchmaking methods, including online dating and campus courtship, exist and are well used by the urban population. Nonetheless, some parents remain unhappy with their children’s efforts, their children’s choices, or both, and in response such parents have created a new method of matchmaking, fumu xiangqin.

The emancipatory power of economic independence was evident in the stories of the women I interviewed. While there was a range of personal and romantic options theoretically available to all these high-status urban women, some of which were discussed in Chapter 7, from the narratives of the women that were explored in Chapters 5 and 6 it was clear that it is more possible for decisions to match desires when the women involved are financially well-off. True economic independence has meant women are able to choose a personal life course based more on what they think will give them emotional satisfaction rather than what will secure their financial future. Buying an apartment for oneself instead of waiting to acquire one with a husband is one example of this. Knowing that one has the financial capacity to support oneself and one’s child was essential for mothers of dependent children to feel that divorce is something they could handle and therefore could pursue if desired. My findings here differ slightly from those proposed by James Raymo based on his research about marriage in Japan.\textsuperscript{6} Raymo borrows from Gary S. Becker, a proponent of the view of marriage as an economic exchange, to propose that the increased economic resources of women mean that marriage is less attractive to such women. The most well-resourced of my interviewees did not indicate a sense of potential economic loss or gain attached to getting married. Emotional and life satisfaction was the overriding concern.

The above observations are all firmly situated in a context of changes in sexual practice that are occurring throughout China, but apparently most so in urban settings and among educated groups. Women and men are revising their ideas on sexual pleasure. As Chapter 1 noted, Pan Suiming has astutely observed that in introducing the one-child policy three decades ago the Chinese government helped bring about such changes. By separating sex from

reproduction the state encouraged men and women to rethink the discourses on sex that had prevailed over the previous decade, and to explore what sexuality entailed for them as individuals. For the women of my study, to delay, forgo, or end a marriage did not destine them to a celibate life. For them, and quite likely for many other men and women, sex outside of marriage is considered a normal part of life in contemporary China.

This exploration of the romantic desires and decision-making of a group of highly educated and high-income women has added to the growing reminders that this ‘revolution’, as some might call it, is not simply about sex. It is more encompassing than that, touching upon conceptions of love, relationships, family, and emotional fulfilment. More important than resolving the question of celibacy, for the women of my study what has had the greatest power in terms of shaping their personal lives is a growing feeling that marriage is by no means the only way to ensure an emotionally satisfying life.

**Limitations of the study and areas for future research**

This study has, naturally, been limited in its scope. I have focused on a very elite group of women. And I have relied largely on media analysis and personal interviews for the collection of information. While this approach has provided a rich and interesting picture of the personal lives of a particular subset of the Chinese population, and while it is possible to extrapolate the significance of my findings to broader groups and trends in contemporary Chinese society, the research has raised a number of questions for future study.

In relation to the issue of my sample and the significance of looking at one specific subsection of Chinese society, I acknowledge that in order to have fully
established that these women differ from other women, and to have made it possible to directly compare the ways in which these women spoke about their lives, I would need to have interviewed a substantial number of women across the income and education spectrums and in various urban and rural locations. In relation to the predictive power of this study, as research was only conducted over a limited time frame the findings are limited to the romantic circumstances of women at a certain point in time. It cannot firmly tell us about the future development of lives and attitudes and whether future social mores among this subset will shift in specific directions. It would be instructive for me to follow these women through their lives and track whether or not they do indeed marry, or divorce, or live in non-normative romantic arrangements over the long term. It would also be instructive to interview all of their partners about their relationships, particularly in relation to perceived and desired degrees of equality and the sense of contingency and ongoing negotiation in contemporary relationships. Another avenue which may have strengthened this research in relation to the question of agency and single status would have entailed a fuller exploration of whether others found them appealing as potential partners. While I did conduct a brief survey of people on Beijing streets and in Beijing offices, I did not conduct any systematic interviewing with men who had regular contacts with high-status women and who were potential mates. To have surveyed men in the work places and educational institutions of these women would have added to an understanding of the issues dealt with in this dissertation.

At the end of the day, this study raises a number of significant questions that will be important to observe and explore in the future. First, will these groups of successful Chinese women, and middle-class Chinese women more broadly, participate in a large-scale transformation of intimacy as foreshadowed by Giddens? Given the centrality of the family unit in most cultures and particularly in China, what will this mean for Chinese society?
Second, Giddens argues that this transformation of intimacy is essentially a democratisation of personal life, which will in turn lead to increased democracy within the polity. I am not sure that this is the case. The fabled democratizing potential of the middle class may in fact be curbed in China by a greater satisfaction with their intimate lives. The challenge for the Chinese government is to ensure that these groups have sufficient flexibility in terms of enjoyment of their ‘private’ lives that any discontent can be kept below critical levels.

However, the Chinese government has interfered in an unprecedented way in women’s lives and reproduction through the one-child policy and vigorous campaigns to limit women’s fertility. Could it be that the state will one day take issue not with ‘excess’ births by Chinese women but with a growing group of women who either want to have children outside of marriage or are just not interested in the idea of giving birth at all?

These questions cannot be answered at this stage. What present circumstances can tell us, however, is that high-status women in urban China, particularly those who are most aware of the outside world, are beginning to revise their ideas on love and relationships. Where these ideas intersect with having sufficient earning power to not have to worry about marrying a man for pragmatic reasons, women like Jean Xue are living their personal lives in ways that they see fit, and with regard for but not necessarily in compliance with gender, relationship, and family norms. As incomes and education levels increase, and as the Chinese economy becomes even more enmeshed with global markets, the changes that we are now witnessing in the personal lives of high-status urban women might be a sign of things to come. How high-status women continue to navigate between ostensibly competing gender role expectations will be particularly interesting to observe, as it will have an impact on the subject positions and lifestyles available to Chinese women in the future.
Appendix 1: List of interviewees

Highly educated interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>Age*</th>
<th>Marital Status*</th>
<th>Children?*</th>
<th>Occupation*</th>
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<td>Lucy Qin</td>
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*At first interview.
## High-income interviewees

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*At first interview.
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