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## December-May: Exploring a “New” Chinese Marriage Pattern

Kepei Miao

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**December-May:  
Exploring a “New” Chinese Marriage Pattern**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors  
May 2014

Honors Capstone Project in Sociology

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Date: 4/23/2014

## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the reasons for an emerging pattern of men marrying older women in China. This is not only a trend being shown on television, in newspapers, and on websites, but also a real-life experience of non-celebrities.

Fifteen semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with six males and nine females with an age range from 17 to 44 years old were conducted in Beijing, China. I identified four strong factors that pull people into these relationships: women's increased enrollment rate in schools, changes in ideologies of mate selection, economic pressures, and the difference between apparent age and psychological age. In addition, there are two factors which used to have a strong effect on breaking up couples in this marriage pattern, but now have less power: problems in relationships besides age for both men and women, and less concern from parents and friends about the age difference.

Although this marriage pattern in China has been dramatized and labeled "brand new", I contend that this pattern is partly a continuation of the older Chinese marriage system of concubines in this era. An environment of labeling and the cultural attraction to spectacles and megaspectacles both contribute to raising considerable attention to this marriage pattern. I also question the conclusion that that people, especially women, are now given more choices regarding partner selections.

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## Executive Summary

Dramatic portraits of men marrying women five or even ten years their senior in the media have spurred self-ridicule on the part of a myriad of single female cyber-citizens: “It does not matter that I have not found my partner because my Mr. Right is probably still in elementary school now. I believe that I am patient enough to wait for him.” Women’s relationships with younger men have become a popular love and marriage trend in China. Women’s relationships with younger men are not only a trend being shown on television, in newspapers, and on websites, but also a real-life experience of non-celebrities. However, although the media portray relationships in which the age gap is very large, in real life the age differences may not be that drastic.

In traditional China, family had much larger social connotations beyond being a private matter; every family was a micro-society. People believed that the meaning of marriage was to unite the two clans, to console the ancestors, and to continue and perpetuate the family line. Thus, as an old Chinese adage states, “It is bliss to marry a woman three years senior.” Thus, the marriage pattern in which the wife is older than the husband, is not necessarily a new phenomenon. In traditional China, this pattern has its economic, social, and cultural roots.

Economically, marriage was a means of creating labor power. Therefore, the older the woman, the more likely she was biologically mature enough to give birth.

Socially, China has been a patriarchal society; women stayed at home as

caretakers. Older women were more likely to be able to take care of the family. Culturally, the Chinese marriage system of concubines allowed men with older wives to pursue younger beauties, as they could take more than one concubine. However, despite the historical heritage of men marrying older women, the opposite pattern is also deeply embedded in Chinese culture, especially since monogamy is widely acknowledged in most parts of China. It is considered normal and traditional for men to marry younger women.

In order to explore the reasons for an emerging pattern of men marrying older women in China, fifteen semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with six males and nine females with an age range from 17 to 44 years old were conducted in Beijing, China. During the interviews, I sought answers to questions such as: What rationale do men offer when they choose to marry older women? How do women interpret their decision to marry younger men? What benefits as opposed to disadvantages can they get from this type of marriage? Since people are emotional beings, and marriage is a personal decision, I also explored questions like: What were their subjective reasons for carrying out the decision? What concerns do they have and how do they manage marriage in a way that will give them a better life?

In my interviews, I identified four strong factors that pull people into these relationships, plus two weak factors that can discourage people from forming this type of relationship. School remains the major place for people to start their

relationships. The increasing female school enrollment rate creates opportunities for young people to meet and develop relationships. Along with the feminist movements, men's preferences for women have changed. Many men are now more attracted to independent and mature women. At the same time, more educated women believe they can earn a living by themselves, so they view a man's solid economic foundation before marriage as a less important criterion. Faced by economic pressure, men tend to marry earlier, so that they can find partners with whom they can manage the pressure together. Contrary to some people's analysis, the one-child policy does not seem to increase the incidence of the Oedipus complex in men; however, the women are typically "babies" who are taken care of by their male partners.

At the same time, there are fewer forces to pull people apart. Due to the imbalanced sex ratio, men are becoming less "picky" and are less likely to leave their relationships. Women, especially women in their mid-twenties, on the other hand, are also less likely to start new relationships because they are afraid of being "left over". Less pressure is felt from parents and friends, since this mate selection trend is increasingly popular. Interestingly, many interviewees seem to have a family heritage of women's relationships with younger men.

In addition to the reasons for this mate selection pattern, two myths were debunked. One well promulgated myth claims there are superior sexual experiences as a result of this mating pattern. However, this may not be true, at

least for all people. Another myth involves people's pessimistic views toward two people in different life stages being together. In fact, couples adopt various strategies to solve this problem.

However, although this marriage format is labeled "brand new" in the media and by many people, I consider it as a practice with its root in the Chinese marriage system of concubines. A more important reason for framing the issue as new is that we are living in an era when people are very conscious of differences and rely on labels to differentiate themselves from other people. Narcissism, another characteristic of people in the postmodern period, creates the need for people themselves to constantly create spectacles to attract others' attention. Thus, the lack of reference to Chinese marriage system of concubines, the environment of labeling, and the cultural attraction to spectacles and megaspectacles all contribute to raise considerable attention to this marriage pattern.

Examining this partner selection pattern alone, many people are conclude that people, especially women, are given more choices regarding partner selections. However, I suspect this pattern is partly a continuation of the traditional concubine system in this era. The change of preference can be explained as openness to more options with regard to age differences; however, it can also be explained as a forced compromise to various kinds of pressures. With the emergence of this pattern of women marrying younger men, another phenomenon is emerging at the same time, in which many young girls in their early twenties



are marrying or maintaining romantic relationships with successful men in their forties, fifties, or even sixties. The co-existence of the two patterns suggests that Chinese women might have been divided into two subgroups, with one group of women taking the role similar to the wife in the concubine system, and the other group taking the role similar to the concubines in the ancient time. If this is true, then the question of whether people, especially women, are having more opportunities and options in terms of choosing marriages is left open to further discussions.

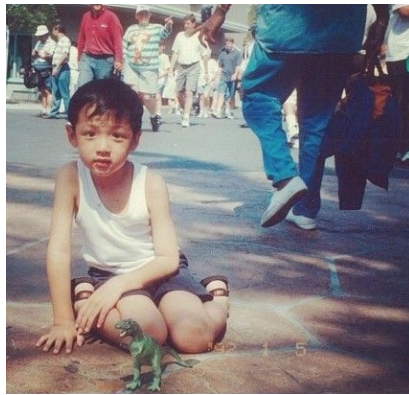
## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who gave me the possibility to complete this thesis. First, I cannot express enough my thanks to Prof. Himes and Prof. DeVault for guiding me through each phase of the project. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Dr. MacDonald for getting me interested in sociology of family and offering his insights. Also, a big thank you is owed to Prof. Orr for introducing me to the concept of spectacle. My completion of this project could not have been accomplished without the support of Henry Jankiewicz, Joseph William Denn, and Alyssa Helene Hennessey, who helped me edit the paper. I am also extremely grateful for all of my interviewees, my family, my friends, my senior thesis class peers, and all other members who have helped me in any way. Last but not least, a special thank you is owed to my boyfriend, who has inspired and fueled my interest in this study, and who is always supportive and encouraging.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Mr. Right in elementary school



The photo above is a picture that has spread widely through Chinese online micro-blogs. The photo was taken in 2003 (1992 the Republic of China), and the child playing with the plastic dinosaur on the street is Kai Ko, now a renowned Taiwanese film star. The same year this photo was taken, his current girlfriend Elva Hsiao, a famous Taiwanese singer, had already released six albums. Elva Hsiao is twelve years older than Kai Ko, and their relationship, which started several years ago, has been a topic of great concern; but theirs is not the only one. There are other celebrity couples whose relationships attract considerable attention because of their age difference. Rainie Yang, a singer as

well as a movie star, is five years older than her partner Prince who is also a singer as well as a variety TV host. Jolin Tsai, also a singer, is six years older than her partner Vivian Dawson, a model. Yili Ma and Zhang Wen, and Yuanyuan Gao and Mark Zhao, all film stars, are nine years and five years apart respectively. Thus, this photo has spurred self-ridicule on the part of a myriad of single female cyber-citizens: “It does not matter that I have not found my partner because my Mr. Right is probably still in elementary school now. I believe that I am patient enough to wait for him.”

It is hard to pinpoint when women’s relationships with younger men became a popular love and marriage trend in China. However, as long as people are not living in a separated, isolated, or imaginary world, they must have heard about this pattern. Mass media are among the most important tools in propagating this image. When I typed the keyword “women’s relationships with younger men” on Baidu,<sup>1</sup> the largest online search engine in China, about 19,500,000 related web pages were listed as a result.

In addition to the stories mentioned in the previous paragraph, heated discussions about this new mate selection pattern in newspapers, on the radio, and on websites helped draw more public attention. One of the newspapers with the largest coverage in China, the *Information Times*, published a list of celebrities who are involved in this trend under the title “The New Marriage Pattern among Chinese Celebrities” on January 3, 2013. One of the main broadcasting stations in China, the Changchun Broadcasting Station (FM88.9), broadcast stories

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<sup>1</sup> [www. baidu.com](http://www.baidu.com)

illustrating the potential disastrous effects of this new marriage pattern, under the title “A Sad Story” on February 22, 2013. A leading news website in China, the *Sohu News*, posted a story telling of another older/young pairing under the title “A New Marriage Pattern” on October 15, 2012. The trend has also aroused serious discussion among psychologists and sociologists on talk shows. The main talk show channel in China, BTV Education, hosted several programs which invited psychologists, sociologists, and celebrities who are involved in this emerging structure to discuss the formation of the pattern and its consequences. The most recent programs were broadcast on March 31, 2013, and August 8, 2013.

Women’s relationships with younger men are not only a trend being shown on television, in newspapers, and on websites, but also a real-life experience of non-celebrities. Although there are few official data showing an exact number of people who exemplify this pattern, surveys reveal that the majority of people acknowledge the trend. A survey, initiated by a Chinese online dating website, conducted by over ten media companies and involving more than 30 million people from all parts of China, revealed the Chinese people’s changed attitudes towards mate selection and marriage. In this survey, nearly 80 percent of participants claimed that they accepted women’s relationships with younger men. Among these respondents, over half expressed their willingness to try these relationships themselves.<sup>2</sup>

However, although the media portray relationships in which the age gap is very large, in real life the age differences may not be that drastic. According to

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<sup>2</sup> 《2010-2011 年中国男女婚恋观调查报告粉皮书》.

the *Hang Zhou Daily Express*,<sup>3</sup> data were collected in two districts in Ningbo City. Among all the couples who married in March 2009, 86 involved unions in which the bride was older than the bridegroom, which represents 9.4% of registered marriages of that month. Of the 86 couples, 51 were less than one year apart; 11 were one to two years apart; 8 were two to three years apart; and 16 were more than three years apart.

To describe this trend, a few new slang terms have been added to the folk lexicon and are widely used, especially among young people in China. Within a “*jiedi lian*,” a relationship in which the female is older than her male partner, the woman is called names like “*yujie*,” “*o-ni-san*,” “mercy sister,” “royal sister,” “my queen,” “defeated queen,” and “lost dog queen” etc. The man in this relationship may be called “*zhengtai*,” “*shota*,” “is too,” and “small is too” etc. Derived from these nouns, there are adjectives that describe a certain group of people who are more likely to be attracted to another group of people. For instance, the word “*shotacon*”, refers to women who are attracted to younger men. “Royal sister controlled” describes young men who are attracted to, and willingly being controlled by, older women.

Many of these words are imported from other Asian countries. In the first few years they were introduced, they referred only to people with large age gaps, typically more than five years. However, as time passed, these words came to pertain to a broader group of people – anybody who engaged in this mate-selection pattern – and there is no standard imposed on the age difference that

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<sup>3</sup> 俞莹. 2009-4-21. “宁波最新婚姻数据显示十对结婚夫妻中就有一对姐弟恋”. 宁波快报都市报报道.

these words describe. People with a small age difference, such as one year apart, are now also being labeled as instances of “*jiedi lian*.”

### **A historical trend versus a new phenomenon**

Family is the first social institution and includes a whole range of social functions. Unlike the situation in western countries, where many functions of family life have been separated from the family as society developed, in China, “the world is indeed inside the walls of the house in all its generations” (Buck, 1971, p. 35). In traditional China, every family is a micro-society. Family was not considered a private preserve where family members are united by unconditional love until very recent times. In ancient China, family had much larger social connotations beyond being a private matter.

In the Chinese feudal and patriarchal clan system, people, rather than being individuals, were parts of and representatives of their clans. Clans, rather than individuals, were units of action. Marriage was one of the most important ways in which clans communicate with each other. Thus, marriage was arranged by matchmakers and commanded by the head of the clans, usually the parents. As stated in *The Book of Rites with Righteousness*, the meaning of marriage was to unite the two clans, to console the ancestors, and to continue and perpetuate the family line (Dai, De. & Dai, Sheng. Han Dynasty).

In this marriage system, people seldom arranged marriages based on pure love; instead, they followed the wisdom embodied in a myriad of adages. Among them is an old Chinese adage that has been orally passed down through generations, “It is bliss to marry a woman three years senior.” Therefore, the marriage pattern in which the wife is older than the husband, is not necessarily a



new phenomenon. In traditional China, this pattern has its economic, social, and cultural roots.

China has long been an agricultural country. Without advanced means of production, a large amount of labor power was required for sustaining physical existence. Marriage was a means of creating labor power. Women and men married in their teens, and the older the woman, the more likely she was biologically mature enough to give birth. From a social perspective, China has been a patriarchal society; women and men belonged to separate spheres. Men worked outside the family to earn money and women stayed at home as caretakers. Older women were more likely to be able to take care of the family. Culturally, China had a marriage system involving a species of monogamy with several concubines. Although the older wife was the head in the family, men could marry several concubines, who had a status inferior to that of the wife. Thus, although younger women are physically and psychologically more appealing to men, marrying older women does not prohibit men from pursuing younger beauties, as they can take more than one concubine.

However, despite the historical heritage of men marrying older women, the opposite pattern is also deeply embedded in Chinese culture, especially since monogamy is widely acknowledged in most parts of China. One notion to be clarified is that the Chinese marriage system of concubines is not an example of polygamy. It actually is a branch of monogamy because the concubines have less power than the wife does. Also, the children born of the wife have higher status than children born of concubines. From many perspectives, the wife maintains the

only legal status in the family. However, from the husband's point of view, the wife and other concubines were substitutes as long as they were all his women. The turning point came in with the enactment of the Chinese Marriage Law, which specified that men could only have one wife and having more than one wife was deemed as a violation of the law. Deprived of the right of seeking sexual satisfaction from other women in the family, men started to marry younger women instead of older women.

## Mate selection transformation

Social scientists started to be aware of this phenomenon of women's relationships with younger men beginning in 2004. In two of the most widely used data bases (CNKI and Lib sjtu), the earliest articles that addressed this issue were in 2004, and since then, the number of papers published has dramatically increased.

A great proportion of the articles selected for this study were found in magazines that focused on scandals in the entertainment, athletic, and business industries, introduced celebrity couples who are involved in this pattern, analyzed their life stories, and predicted the future of these relationships.<sup>4</sup> General analysis and case studies reveal a common theme that this love and marriage pattern has become more welcomed among celebrities. Although there are different voices estimating the outcomes of these relationships, no one can give a definite prediction of their success or failure.

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- 4 “娱乐圈“姐弟恋”时代到来”. 2012-7-5. 时代人物.  
 “细数娱乐圈悲喜交加的“姐弟恋””. 2012-7-5. 时代人物.  
 “娱乐圈“情”事不断 大龄女明星“姐弟恋”前景分析”. 2012-7-5. 时代人物.  
 “娱乐圈姐弟恋靠谱吗?”. 2012-6-1. 流行歌曲.  
 “姐弟恋席卷娱乐圈”. 2013-7-2. 科学新生活.  
 ““都市女郎”袁立：将美丽“姐弟恋”进行到底”. 2006-7-1. 传奇文学选刊.  
 “商界佳人与相声才子：相差十岁的“姐弟恋”不容易”. 2011-10-1. 婚姻与家庭（社会纪实）.  
 “姐弟恋之娱乐档案”. 2004-1-15. 现代健康人.  
 “走出寂寥岁月，“姐弟恋”让杜晓宇再次荣光”. 2013-11-1. 幸福（婚姻）.  
 “张惠妹：誓将“姐弟恋”进行到底”. 2009-10-15. 人生与伴侣（下半月版）.  
 ““乒坛皇后”与“练球先生”的浪漫姐弟恋”. 2005-7-1. 新闻天地.  
 “NBA中的姐弟恋”. 2012-8-8. 当代体育.  
 “那英和徐明：走出沧桑后的“姐弟恋””. 2007-2-1. 八小时以外.  
 “张楠赵云蕾：姐弟恋修成冠军”. 2012-9-20. 恋爱婚姻家庭（养生）.  
 “世界冠军“姐弟恋”情比金坚—我国第一队金牌残疾夫妇的爱情故事”. 2003-5-15. 公安月刊.

Another great portion of the articles investigate and evaluate the advantages of this pattern and possible reasons for the growing numbers of this type of relationship. Some authors contend that this arrangement provides a superior sexual life that keeps the family intact.<sup>5</sup> Many articles point out that the commonly claimed ground for divorce, incompatibility of temperament, veils the actual reason for divorce, an unsatisfactory sexual life. These papers state the advantages of women's relationships with younger men in terms of superior sexual experience.

A few other articles allude to legendary love stories that hearken back to thousands of years ago in Chinese history, trying to make the point that this is not a new phenomenon at all.<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing a lack of scholarly organized or research-based articles illustrating reasons for the increasingly popular mate selection pattern, this study examines the reasons behind people's preference for this type of mate selection pattern.

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<sup>5</sup> “大姐配小弟 性爱甜如蜜？” . 2011-3-10. 婚育与健康.  
 “合上“妻姐”的“性”节拍” . 2002-9-15. 健康.  
 ““姐弟恋”的性爱更完美” . 2004-1-15. 现代健康人.  
 “专家：“姐弟恋”好处多多” . 2006-5-1. 黄金时代.  
 “恋上他年轻的身体” . 2007-2-15. 都市生活.

<sup>6</sup> “古代几个经典姐弟爱情故事” . 2006-5-1. 黄金时代.  
 “相差十七岁的姐弟恋 万贵妃掀起《后宫》血雨腥风” . 2011-12-15. 文史参考.  
 “明宪宗钟情姐弟恋” . 2012-12-1. 民间传奇故事 (A 卷).  
 “影响历史进程的古代“姐弟恋”” . 2013-1-15. 晚报文萃.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Method**

I conducted tape-recorded, semi-structured interviews of approximately 40-60 minutes in length with fifteen people who are involved in relationships that fit this marriage pattern. This means they are either married or in relationships where the woman is older than the man. I selected interviewees with an age range of 17 to 44 years old. Among them, seven people are married, six people are planning to marry in the near future, and two of them have not yet seriously considered marriage.

Of those whom I interviewed, six are male and nine are female. There were six couples and three individuals. The three remaining were individuals, but I did not interview their partners, because they were either on business trips or working outside of Beijing during the time I was there. I interviewed coupled participants separately. Most of the interviews were conducted in cafés, where I bought interviewees drinks and we talked. Sometimes, I made individual appointments with those in couples and interviewed them individually. Otherwise, when they arrived together, I interviewed the female first, while the male waited in the same café away from our table. After the first interview was done, they changed seats, and I continued to interview the male.

Interviewees were recruited through a snowball sampling process. Two couples have direct relationships with my family; one couple is my cousin and her

husband, and another couple are friends of my parents. Other interviewees were introduced to me by my friends and their friends. I informed all the interviewees of the aim of the project, and promised them confidentiality. They all gave me oral consent to conduct the interviews. All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

All of the interviews were conducted in Chinese because all of the participants and I as well are Chinese native speakers. By constructing the interview questions in Chinese, I could excavate more detailed answers and sometimes probe for unspoken cultural nuances. By allowing the participants to answer in Chinese, they could fully elaborate their points and express their feelings. I transcribed the interviews in Chinese, analyzed them, and then translated the excerpts I have included in the paper.

During the interviews, I sought answers to questions such as: What rationale do men offer when they choose to marry older women? How do women interpret their decision to marry younger men? What benefits as opposed to disadvantages can they get from this type of marriage? Since people are emotional beings, and marriage is a personal decision, I also explored questions like: What were their subjective reasons for carrying out the decision? What concerns do they have and how do they manage marriage in a way that will give them a better life? The general questions I asked are listed as follows.

1. Background information: age, educational backgrounds, and job (income and wealth)
2. Relationships:

(1) How did the relationship start? How did it work? What were your feelings about the age gap at the beginning? Were there any troubles because of the age gap? Have you been in other traditional relationships? What are the differences between the two different patterns? What is your parents' age gap? How did you deal with the pressure from other people, if there was any?

(2) What made you decide to enter into marriage? Were there any concerns or resistance from your own family? How did you think about this type of marriage before actually marrying your partner? How did you feel about the age gap then?

(3) Now that you are married, have there been any troubles you had not thought about previously? How do you deal with them? How did the age difference affect your relationship? How did you feel about the age difference when you got married? In what aspects do you think your marriage is different from a traditional one? How did you deal with the problem when you were in different life stages? Who launched a career first? Who is the breadwinner now? What do you gain or lose from this particular type of marriage? Who does more house chores?

(4) What are your plans for your marriage? Do you have children? Are you planning to have children? Why or why not? Do you want to have children and if so, when? Do you have any concerns about the future?

Interview questions were based on the phases of relationship

developments. For each interviewee, I asked questions based on his or her relationship status. For married people, I asked all the questions listed above, and for unmarried people, I emphasized the first half of the questions and asked them for more details.

Throughout the interviews, I identified seven commonly mentioned issues. In the next section, I explain the beginnings of the relationships and the spouses' feelings about this marriage pattern. Then, the third section analyzes four contributing factors to the development of the relationships: women's increased enrollment rate in schools, changes in mate selection preferences, economic pressures, and the difference between apparent age and psychological age. The fourth section identifies two factors which used to have a strong effect on breaking

up couples in this marriage pattern, but now have less power: problems in relationships besides age for both men and women, and less concerns from parents and friends about the age difference. The second to the last section discusses some limitations of this study. Finally, the last section offers some concluding thoughts.



### Chapter 3

#### It just happened

Love is probably one of the most mysterious, and transitory human emotional experiences. Marriage for love, as described by John Jacobs, is “an institution that brings together two people under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive, and most transient of passions. They are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal, and exhausting condition continuously until death do them part” (Jacobs, 2004, p. 9).

This mysterious experience demonstrates itself in many of my interviews. When asked how they started their relationships and how they perceived the age difference at the very beginning, most interviewees posited that they did not intend to pursue a relationship with such an age difference, it just happened.

Xixi, 28, married her husband Cheng, who is two years junior to her. She described the starting point of their relationship as a mystery.

“He had been in my QQ<sup>7</sup> friend list for a long time before I talked to him. Odd as it was, neither of us remembered how we were friended with each other. Then one day, I was just depressed and wanted to chat with someone. It was so late at night that most of my friends were off line, but he was online. So I talked to him and just felt that he was so warmhearted and considerate, and I just felt myself liking him. So after another time or two chatting online, we decided to meet up.”

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<sup>7</sup> a dominant Chinese online communication device

However mysterious the start of their relationship, they fell in love after their subsequent meetings and decided to marry. Now they have been married for three years. Xixi was pregnant during my interview, and her child was born soon after I began writing the paper. Recalling their love story, she summarized that it just happened.

“We just started from there. ... I knew he was younger than me at that time; he was still in college and I had just started working... I mean I did not expect to marry someone who is younger than me, after all, who does not want to marry someone who has a solid financial foundation? But it just happened.”

Xixi is not the only person who perceived their relationship as somewhat of a coincidence; other people also believe their relationships happened purely by chance. Jiao, a 17-year-old boy, met his girlfriend, who is five years older than him, in the airport.

“It was 3 years ago in the Tibet airport. Our flight was delayed and all the people were waiting in the waiting room. She approached me because she misrecognized me as one of her acquaintances. It was a little awkward. But at the first sight, I fell in love with her because she was just so gorgeous. ... We have been together for 3 years so far, and we both think we can conquer the age problem.”

While some people fall in love at first sight, others believe that love will come in time. Hong is such an example. She is a 24-year-old graduate student who is in love with an undergraduate student two years her junior.

“We were in the same mountaineering association in college and that was how we got to know each other. Mountain climbing is an activity that requires teamwork. To form strong ties among club

members, we often have activities for the purpose of mingling. Thus, all of the club members have pretty intimate friendships with each other. We often practice together in pairs, and I think it helped with the development of our relationship. You know when you stay with someone for a long time, you just get used to it. It was kind of like dating when just the two of us practiced together, and we did not formally declare our relationship, but people just could feel it and that is it. ... I am not really worried about the age issue. I am not saying that I have no concern at all, but this is the man here, and I just think I should value our relationship.”

Again, Meng told me a similar story. Meng is a 24-year-old graduate student, and his girlfriend is more than one year older than he and now working.

“We were high school classmates, and I just felt myself liking her at that time. We spent not a lot, but quite a bit, of time together doing homework and other stuff in high school. We decided to start our relationship after our graduation. ... I did not intend to have a girlfriend who is older than me, but since I entered primary school one and a half years earlier than other children, I have always been the youngest student in my class. All the girls I am familiar with are older than me. I think she is just the right person. I do not want the age issue to be an obstacle in our relationship.”

Thirteen out of fifteen interviewees stated that they had no expectations of being involved in a relationship with such an age difference; however, “it just happened.” People may all have images of Mr. or Mrs. Right in their minds; however, when they meet their match in real life, the images collapse and are replaced by the figures of their real partners. Many things in life cannot be anticipated, especially relationships. Most people accept what they have because they believe love finds them instead of their finding love. However, this view of

fortune or determinism has a social layer attached to it, which I will analyze below.

Not every person I interviewed viewed the age difference in their relationships as happening by chance; two women said that they were deliberately looking for younger male partners. Yue, a 22-year old senior student majoring in information design, told me of her obsession with younger guys:

“I have had two relationships so far. My ex-boyfriend was two years younger than me, and my current boyfriend is three years younger than me. I am attracted to young guys, especially when they are good-looking. You know, like those *zhengtai*, I am just bedazzled by their boyish appearance. They are just so cute and innocent. You tell me; how I can refuse them. ... I think I am so obsessed by young guys because I watch Japanese anime a lot. Those characters grow on me, and it is really hard not to be influenced by those images. ... I don't see much of a problem with this mate selection pattern, or at least not a problem for me. I am financially independent enough to support myself in a good life. This gives me more room to choose whomever I want. I just like young guys, and I can choose to develop relationships with them.”

If you think this thinking only applies to some immature girls, then you will be astonished to know that this mate preference also applies to the oldest interviewee. Tian, a 44-year-old human resources manager whose husband is two years younger than she, has been married for over ten years and has an 8-year-old son.

“I don't like guys who are older than me or at the same age as I am, you know especially those who have had too many experiences. I feel like if I stay with them, get to know their friends, and participate in their social life, then I will get old too. The advantage of being with younger partners is that

they are so energy filled, and you yourself become energetic just by living with them. Being introduced to his friends, you would also get to know more young people as if the new blood were injected into your body. I experienced several relationships when I was young, and none of my ex-boyfriends were older than I was. ... Anyway, I can support myself and I don't care about his money."

Yue and Tian, who claimed that they were only attracted to younger guys, either physically or psychologically, seem to be different from other people. However, it seems to me that they are only different in the way that they express themselves explicitly. Their refusals of older men reveal that they may be more determined than other women, which does not necessarily set them apart from other women. They identify themselves as "*shotacon*", women who are obsessed by younger men, because they believe the traits they appreciate only belong to younger men. In their minds, age corresponds to these personal traits, such as being good-looking and energetic. Other people I interviewed, on the other hand, do not preclude the possibility that older people can also possess these personal traits. Without stereotypes, they do not put a constraint on the age of their partners ahead of time.

I contend that although people who deliberately express their intention of deploying this mate selection strategy seem to be somewhat different from others who do not, when we explore deeper reasons for it, we will find that these people are more alike than different. The following two sections examine an increasing number of factors that pull partners like these together, as well as a decreasing number of factors that pull them apart. Both contribute to sustaining this type of relationship.

## Chapter 4

### Stronger forces to pull people together

#### We met in school

When analyzing reasons for this new mate selection pattern, the first majority of people first conjure up psychological reasons. However, as a Chinese adage goes, “Successes come only when three criteria are all satisfied: the appropriate time, a favorable location, and exceptional human conditions.” These three criteria are mentioned in order of importance. In mate selection, success refers to having a stable and harmonious relationship or marriage. The three components of content relationships represent themselves as bumping into the right people in suitable places at the proper time.

Since China’s antiquity, adolescence has been considered a time for people to fall in love. In the *Books of Songs*, the oldest written literature in Chinese history, poets recognized fourteen as the age when young people start to pursue love experiences.

The interviewees in this study ranges from their late teens to their mid-forties. One common theme that emerged is that the majority of people met their partners at school or through their mutual friends at school. Except for the youngest interviewee, who claimed that he met his girlfriend unexpectedly at the airport, and the couple had no idea that they had been QQ friends long before they

talked to each other face-to-face, the entire group started their relationships in school, either in college or high school, or through mutual friends when they were in college.

Ying, a 26-year-old fourth-year doctoral student whose partner is two years younger than she, met her current boyfriend in graduate school.

“We met each other in graduate school. I know it is a proper time to find a partner, since we still have some leisure time, which seems to be a luxury for working people. We were in the same club, and I just thought that he was cute and had a sense of humor that I recognized through daily interactions. We became friends and later boyfriend and girlfriend.”

Similarly, Liang, a 23-year-old master’s student who has a boyfriend more than a year her junior, also met her boyfriend in graduate school.

“We just met at school in the same club. ... I just felt he was nice and caring, so I agreed when he asked me to become his girlfriend. It is nice, you know, when you are in the same school so that you can see each other whenever you want. That’s one of the advantages to developing a relationship at school.”

Some other people met their partners in college through their friends. For example, De, 42, recalled when he met his wife:

“She was my college roommate’s girlfriend at that time. She came to our school for a visit and that was how I got to know her. We didn’t really contact each other for a couple of years, until I went to her hometown for a project. We became closer at that time, and later she came to Beijing to attend the same graduate school that I did.”

Wang, a 30-year-old factory owner whose wife is two years older than he, is another example.

“I met her when I was in college. She was my classmate’s high school friend. She came to our school to visit my classmate and that was how we were introduced to each other. You know that when you are in college, you have more time to do whatever you want, and after I met her, I just wanted to have her as my girlfriend.”

Although with the development of communication technologies, people have more channels to meet new people and find partners, school is still the most common place for people to start relationships, followed by the workplace. This seems to be trivial to some people in the understanding of the new mate selection pattern since it is so obvious; however, this is the factor of being in the “right place” that I want to address.

Attending the same school allows better interpersonal interactions, which contributes to the development of relationships. Psychologist Robert Sternberg developed the triangular theory of love, and identified three components of love: passion, intimacy, and commitment. Intimacy, by his definition, is an “emotional connection based on the sharing of intense and personal information and the capacity of mutual acceptance” (Nevid & Rathus, 2005, p. 201). Attending the same school, the same class, or the same club ensures intimacy by allowing people more time to become familiar with each other.

In the past, it was difficult for people to meet in school, since girls did not usually attend school in traditional China. However, the school enrollment rate of girls has increased dramatically. According to data reported by United Nations



Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) Institute for Statistics (2013), the female college enrollment rate in China has been steadily increasing since the 1990s. The female-to-male college enrollment ratio exceeded 1 in 2008, and the number has been growing since then.

However, the age constraints of school enrollment are different among different provinces in China. The average primary enrollment age is about six and a half for all of China. However, in many northern provinces, many children start school at seven, or even seven and a half. At the same time, in many southern parts of China, most children start school at around five. In some rural places, where children are not scrutinized when they enter elementary school, they may enter school earlier, for example at four and a half, or later, for example even at the age of eight. Thus, the age wedge becomes larger. Another illegal but common practice in some of the rural areas, where the registrars do not closely check children's birth certificates when registering, is that parents do not register their first baby girl until they have the second child, and then they register them as twins. They do this because having twins is not against the one-child policy, so when parents have the first baby girl, they want to give themselves another chance to have a second baby, in case it is a boy. Thus, the age shown on the ID for the first baby girl is actually younger than her real age. When they go to school at the normal age shown on their IDs, they are, in fact, older than their supposed peers. This practice may increase the number of female students who are older than their male classmates.

## Partner selection preferences

Improvements in women's education have further impacted mate selection preferences by altering social ideologies. As society changes when it changes its mind. In other words, a new social phenomenon emerges when people's ideologies are swayed. An increase in women's educational level is a factor that triggers the changing of ideologies.

Women have more confidence in financially supporting themselves as their educational level increases. Since women are becoming more financially independent and, consequently, less likely to rely on their partners' financial foundations, men's accumulation of wealth is becoming less attractive. By financially independent, I do not only mean women who have very impressive degrees and who can earn much money. By my definition, any woman who can make her own living is considered financially independent. Xixi is an example of the type of woman who is not very highly educated but can support herself.

“I graduated from a community college, not a very competitive educational background. However, I think I can make a living with what I have learned, and that's enough for me. I do not expect to be extremely successful. I just want to live a normal but happy life with some money, maybe not a lot, to support my life. Although I am not making a lot of money but it is enough. ... I know that if I marry someone who is older than I am, then he would have more financial assets, and I believe that everybody wants to marry someone like that. But I am not that desperate. There are many other personal traits that are more important than having a lot of money. ... We can work together to make a better living, and I believe we will.”

Xixi did not go to a four-year college like many other interviewees, and now works in a logistics company without earning a very high income. However, she also thinks that personal traits instead of material assets are the most important to consider in choosing a partner. Again, in Nie's answer, personal traits outweigh money.

“I don't think making money is only men's responsibility. I can make a living by myself, and I think women should be financially independent. I don't think it is a matter if we start from nothing as long as we both work hard and try our best to make a good living. ... There are some girls who want to marry somebody who has a lot of money, and they think that having money is the most important thing. But if you can do it by yourself, why do you need to depend on others? In the end, you are marrying the person not the money.”

Nie is a 32-year-old former senior secretary in a law firm, who has recently quit her job to focus on her family. Her husband is two years younger than her. The recurring theme is that these women choose personal traits over money. This idea is even more firmly held by women who have superb educations like Ying.

“Money is not a huge issue in my mind. I have a doctoral degree and I believe that I can support myself after graduation. It is true that marrying an older man would allow me to live a better life to start with; however, I don't see why I can't earn money using my own hands. I think he will also work hard, for me, and for our future. It is like a journey when two of you both working hard to build your future, and I think I will enjoy it.”

At the same time, some men find independent women more charming.

“My girlfriend is my first crush. I don’t find girls at my age attractive because they are too immature. They are talking about silly girly things all the time, but few of them can sit down, spend some time to read a book or do something meaningful. I just think they are superficial. ... One thing that I love about my girlfriend is that she is independent and she can take care of herself. In fact, we have never been living in the same city since the very beginning of our relationship. But unlike other little girls, my girlfriend can handle her life without my company. That is one thing I really appreciate, which contributes a lot to the stability of our relationship.”

---Jiao.

Though some may think that it is typical for a 17-year-old boy to be attracted to older women, and men change their minds as they grow up, adults that I interviewed also shared this sentiment. Let us hear from two of them.

“I don’t think I am the kind of man who is in need of his wife’s compliments, or even worship. I think those are the people who are not successful enough outside of the family, so that they need to find someone to comfort them at home. Marrying a woman, for me, is not a way to find self-confidence. Those men who marry women who are much younger than them are more likely to hear compliments because their wives are too innocent. ... I like independent women because I think those are the women who can really take care of the family.”

---Wang.

“I think marriage is a little bit different from dating in the sense that the two people need to live together to actually co-construct a family. If you marry someone who is younger, sure, she may be young and pretty, but she may be so inexperienced that she doesn’t even know how to cook. Why would I marry someone who can’t take care of the family? Beauty may win in the short run, but virtues win in

the long run. Marrying an independent women  
benefits the whole family.”

---De.

When men start to consider marriage and having families, they begin to weigh the advantages related to youthfulness against the virtues corresponding to maturity. One common consideration, illustrated in both Wang’s and De’s answers, is whether the women are mature enough to take care of the family. They both prefer women who can handle housework as well as their own work rather than women who need to be taken care of. I consider them both as examples of seeking comrade-like wives who thrive with them together. In Wang’s answer, he identified himself as the kind of person who needs some criticisms from the wife rather than compliments all the time, because compliments make people feel happy but criticisms make people improve. De, at the same time, looked for women who had the virtues to manage the family well and contribute to the prosperity of the whole family. They both treated their wives as comrades, teammates, and partners in terms of co-constructing a thriving family.

## **Economic pressure**

Mate selection preferences are deeply intertwined with the economic pressure faced by young people. While people are earning more money nowadays, inflation has strongly degraded the purchasing power of money. In the face of extraordinarily high living expenses, few people can handle everyday life without difficulty.

Whether to prioritize marriage or career has been a long-debated terrain in China since ancient times. In traditional China, men tended to build their careers first and then considered marriage. However, in the face of the current economic pressure, many young people choose to marry first because they do not see the point of waiting, considering they are not expected to establish their career before thirty. This idea is illustrated in Cheng's response to the question of whether to marry or pursue a career first. He is currently a salesman, married to a wife two years his senior.

“I am not a sexist, but I do feel it is my responsibility to provide my wife and my child with a good life. That is what a man should do for his family. However, it is becoming more and more difficult for people to make money, especially people who do not have an advanced educational background, like I do. I have a bachelor diploma, but you know that there are too many people with college degrees. I was born into a working class family, so that I don't have the networks that many other people do. You may not know how hard it is for people like me to have a career starting from nothing. The era when you can earn a good living just by working hard has gone. ... If I can't have a solid enough financial foundation, then I don't see the point waiting to get married.”

Younger people with advanced educational backgrounds also addressed the problem of balancing marriage and career.

“I often hear people talk about the work-family conflict, but I don’t really see the problem with that. I mean I don’t see why you can’t have family and your career at the same time. ... Although I am still a student right now, with my educational background, I think I can find a good job. I am not saying that I don’t feel the economic pressure, but I think it will be better when two people can face it together. So I don’t see why people wait until they have accumulated enough wealth to marry.”

---Meng.

Unlike older men, young men are more likely to hold an egalitarian view in terms of distributing the financial burden. They think two people need to face it and handle it together instead of leaving it to just one person. In this sense, work-family conflict is a less severe problem because the two people in a relationship are teammates, united to achieve the same goal, without putting the burden solely on the man. This viewpoint is more commonly shared among people who face more economic pressures.

“Neither of us are from Beijing, but we want to work and have a family here. Although I don’t think it will be a big problem for us to find jobs since we both have pretty advanced educational backgrounds. ... Maybe she will enter the work place earlier than I do while I am still in school. But I believe that I will catch up with her soon and become the main provider for my family in the future. ... Sometimes I don’t understand why people can’t handle family and work together. For me, I feel it is better to have someone by your side so that you can face the pressure together.”

---Zhao.

Zhao is a 22-year-old graduate student in a relationship with a woman who is more than one year his senior. Since neither of them holds permanent residence status in Beijing, they face more pressure upon graduation if they want to work and live in Beijing. With more external pressures, they are united more closely as a team to fight for their prosperity in the future. Thus, the economic pressure functions as a force to bring the two people together so that they can thrive. In terms of choosing a partner, these men are more likely to choose more able women as teammates. Since capability is somewhat positively correlated with people's age, the men therefore tend to choose older women.



### **Apparent age versus psychological age**

Some people hold the view that men who are more attracted to older women have an Oedipus complex. However, my interviews reveal that all of the participants who are involved in this new mate selection pattern do not identify with this explanation. On the contrary, I find that, according to almost all accounts, the women are “babies” taken care of by their younger partners.

When asked who is more caring in the relationship – or for the married people, who does more chores at home – most people replied that they were equally caring or they equally shared housework. However, we can still find some traces of an imbalance, especially from women’s descriptions of their relationships. Some women admitted that they are the “babies” more explicitly, while others indicated the same idea less obviously.

“I think my son and I are like two babies at home. Sometimes we may fight for TV or snacks, and my husband will step out to be the judge. Sometimes he says that I have changed since I married him. He thinks that I am becoming more and more childish. ... Many people say that men will never grow up, but I don’t agree with that. I think men are less mature than women to start with, but they probably grow faster when they reach a certain age ... Anyway, I enjoy being a ‘baby’ at home.”  
 ---Tian.

Tian is not the only person who enjoys the feeling of being taken care of as a baby. Other women also benefit from their partners’ personal traits of caring and consideration.

“I think a couple should be equally caring, but I admit that he is more caring than I am. I think that

is one of the reasons why I agreed to be his girlfriend. Although he is two years younger than I am, it doesn't seem like that. I don't think being caring is a matter of age; instead, I think that is a matter of personality. ... You see, many people don't know how to take care of others even when they are old, but some other people are born to care for other people."

---Hong.

"I think on the one hand, people can learn to be caring as they grow up, but on the other hand, some people just know how to take care of other people. Although my husband is two years younger than I am, he is the kind of person who has caring traits in his genes. Back in the days when he was chasing me, he was so cute that it seemed like he wanted to be with me and take care of me every second. It is just him."

---Nie.

People's biological ages may not be consistent with their psychological ages. In my interviews, the majority of women admit they are psychologically younger than their partners are. From the outsiders' perspective, men are marrying older women; but from the insiders' perspective, the truth may be the opposite. Being more caring and considerate are more closely related to personality than to age. Younger people can also be considerate and more psychologically mature.

## Chapter 5

### Weaker forces acting to separate people

#### More issues to worry about

As a falling leaf indicates the coming autumn, often phenomena are interrelated. The mate selection pattern I discuss in this paper is connected to other current phenomena in China. In the interviews, both men and women claimed that they have more things to worry about than their age difference.

Although modern feminist movements have succeeded to a certain extent in China and people have started to recognize that boys and girls are equally valuable, the son preference still pervades in the country. There has long been a shortage of girls in China; however, the female deficit has recently become more problematic (Coale, 1991; Coale & Banister, 1994; Hull, 1990; Banister, 2004). The abnormally high male-to-female sex ratio in China has attracted the attention of many social researchers. The normal range of sex ratio of males to females at birth is between 103 and 107; however, the reported male-to-female sex ratio in China has been increasing dramatically over recent decades (Trent & South, 2011). In 1982, the reported Chinese sex ratio at birth was 107.6 – only slightly outside the typical range (Yuan & Tu, 2005). The number had risen to 111.3 by 1990, and by 2001 it had increased to 118 (Poston & Glover, 2005). The sex ratio at birth reached an astounding 159.4 in 2000 (Yuan & Tu 2004). As a result,

researchers predict that by 2020, approximately 30 million more men than women will enter China's mating market (Brooks, 2013).

Researchers have been studying the possible results of the extremely high sex ratio and have developed various theories. One apparent result derived from my interviews is that men, especially men in their 20s, are less likely to leave their relationships, due to their disadvantageous position in the marriage market.

“I don’t see the age difference as a big issue compared to our height difference. You met my girlfriend in the morning, and you can tell that she is taller than I am. However, you know it is not easy for guys to find a mate, simply because there are too many men in China. My mum told me that I shouldn’t be too picky or I might be left alone.”

---Yue.

“There may be problems about the age difference but I believe every couple has their own problems. ... However, I think we need to work them out rather than let it go. Anyway, it is harder for men to marry because there are too many of them. You know there are many more men than women in our school, and I am majoring in engineering, where you can hardly find any women.”

---Zhao.

Rather than leaving their relationships when problems occur, many male interviewees choose to work them out, partly because they have a clear awareness of their disadvantageous position in the marriage market. Since the increase in the number of men has been so dramatic, they face the problem of being left alone.

Oddly enough, regardless of the outnumbering of women by men, men are not the only group of people who are afraid of being left alone. Although the phenomena of women’s prolonged single lives and postponed marriages are hardly new in many Western countries, an increasing number of highly educated

career women remain unwed in their marriageable ages. This has given rise to the phenomenon of “*sheng nu*” in Mainland China. Regardless of the imbalanced sex ratio of nearly 120 males to 100 females as a result of the one-child policy since 1979, more highly educated career women claim that it is difficult to find a partner. In 2013, the National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China and State Census reported that approximately 1 in 5 women between the ages of 25-29 remain unmarried, despite the fact that 9 out of 10 people in China agree that the ideal marriage age for women is before 27 (BBC News, 2013). It is hard to pinpoint a time when the term “*sheng nu*” came into the mainstream media and people’s daily lives, but according to the *China Daily* (2011), the term was first coined in 2006. In 2007, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China released the first official definition of “*sheng nu*” as any “unmarried woman over the age of 27” and added it to the national lexicon. The ministry categorized it as a “failure to find a husband” due to “overly high expectations for marriage partners.” However, in recent years, the term “*sheng nu*” was given more of a derogatory connotation of “leftover women” and was used especially to describe the status of unmarried professional women in their late twenties and beyond.

There are a few representatives in my interviews of this particular group of highly educated women who faced the potential to be left over. Some of them expressed worries of being left over if they chose to leave their relationships.

“I am 26 this year, and you know, many women my age in my hometown have been married, and some of them even have children. This is a good time for me to find a partner, and I don’t want to wait until I

am very old. I am not particularly worried about being single, but being labeled as “*sheng nu*” is not what I want. And I don’t think my parents will let me do that.”

---Ying.

“I am from a rural place and in my hometown, people marry young. I am 24 and becoming 25 this year. I don’t consider myself old, but I am not young either. My parents expect me to marry as other people do, and you know when you do not belong to the mainstream, people will say something behind your back. The pressure of women in their marriageable age to get married comes from other people, and I really don’t like it.”

---Hong.

Both women mentioned the social pressure they face, which contributes to the sustaining of their relationships. They themselves or their parents do not want them to be labeled as “*sheng nu*.” People still hold the traditional opinion that family should play a necessary and inseparable part in women’s life, and that no matter how successful women are in their work, if they do not have families, their lives are imperfect.

### **Less pressure from families**

As previously mentioned, people's biological age does not always go along with their psychological age. The closer people are, the more likely they will discover each other's psychological age, and that is why older women are taken care of by their younger partners in relationships. However, since other people are not so close to the individuals, they assume that the apparent age represents the psychological age. This is why the couple's parents and friends may hold different opinions than the couple's.

Adults in their marriageable ages have passed the time when they need to seek support from their peers. Therefore, they usually do not seriously consider their friends' opinions, and their friends often do not want to be involved, either, especially when they are against this type of combination. However, parents' ideas still play a large role in people's decision making in China. Many parents, especially women's parents, worried about the age difference when they first heard about it, since they had no idea about what kind of men their daughters chose, except for their age. But after becoming familiar with their daughter-in-law or son-in-law, parents are showing less resistance to such marriages compared to parents a decade ago.

This shift in ideology may be influenced by the increasingly popular mate selection trend, as Tian, the oldest women I interviewed, stated:

“He didn't mention my age when he first introduced me to his parents. When people asked, he said we were about the same age; if I remember correctly, he said I was younger than him to his parents and

his relatives. I didn't argue because I didn't want people to know that I was older than him, either. It was kind of like a shame at that time for a woman to marry someone young because people would think she was the seducer. People were not as open as they now are. It is not a big deal now, since so many women are marrying young guys."

Recognizing the growing number of people who choose this mate selection pattern, more parents accept this marriage pattern than before. In addition to parents' openness, another commonly mentioned reason in the interviews is a family history of younger men marrying older women. Many of the interviewees claim that their parents are open-minded partly because they themselves, or their siblings or cousins, are involved in this mate selection.

Even though Tian's partner did not reveal the truth to his parents and relatives, she spoke candidly to her parents:

"I told my parents the truth because I knew my parents would accept it. Strangely enough, both of my siblings are also involved in this marriage pattern. My brother married a woman who is 3 years older than him, and my sister married a guy who is 1 year younger than her. My parents should be used to that, I think."

Other examples also show the family tradition of women marrying younger men. Meng, the 24-year-old graduate student, told me that his parents would definitely accept this because they themselves are examples of this kind of relationship and demonstrate that it is feasible.

"My mum is two years older than my dad, and they seem to be happy about their marriage. This is why I know they will accept my choice. Also, my cousin is three years older than her husband. They have been married for several years, and to my



knowledge, they do not have problems with regard to the age difference, either.”

Another more dramatic example is given by Yue, one of the two women who expressed a strong desire for younger men. Harkening back to her grandmother’s marriage, she attributed her mate selection preference partly to her family marriage tradition.

“My grandma on my mum’s side married my grandpa, who is three years younger than her. Also, my mum continued the tradition, she married my dad, who is also 3 years younger than her. I don’t want to say their marriage pattern shaped my preferences, but it may have some influences, I don’t know. So I know my parents will never be against my choice of marrying young guys.”

Pressure from parents has long been a factor in children’s mate selection process. Breaking up affectionate couples happened very often in the past, and those stories have been written in books and poems, reflected in songs, and told in folk stories. However, now, young people have more freedom to choose their own marriages rather than accepting arranged marriage by their parents. Also, with the increasing popularity of these arrangements, parents are more open-minded in accepting their children’s choices. Since parents are less involved in the decision-making process, they are playing a smaller role in separating young couples.

## Chapter 6

### Two myths

Although there have been no scholarly articles analyzing the reasons for the mate selection pattern of women marrying younger men, many magazine and newspaper articles have listed several benefits of this pattern, which could contribute to the changing ideology. The majority of the articles listed better sexual experience as a benefit of this pattern.<sup>8</sup> According to doctors, young men experience stronger sexual desire compared to their female peers, but women, especially in their 40s, start to exceed sexual desire compared to their male partners. This mate selection pattern, therefore, would lessen the disparity in sexual desire between men and women, so that it would contribute to better sexual life.

However, according to my interviews, this may not necessarily be true. The couple in their 40s revealed obstacles in their sexual life. The male interviewee, De, claimed that the commonly held opinion about a better sexual life is not necessarily true when women enter menopause. Since I only have one counterexample, it does not allow me to make a generalized conclusion, but this can be an issue for further discussion.

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<sup>8</sup> “大姐配小弟 性爱甜如蜜？” . 2011-3-10. 婚育与健康.  
“合上“妻姐”的“性”节拍” . 2002-9-15. 健康.  
““姐弟恋”的性爱更完美” . 2004-1-15. 现代健康人.  
“专家：“姐弟恋”好处多多” . 2006-5-1. 黄金时代.  
“恋上他年轻的身体” . 2007-2-15. 都市生活.

Another myth with regard to this mate selection pattern is that people in different stages of life will have difficulty staying together. People usually believe that people in different life phases face different problems, and since they cannot personally experience the problems faced by people in other life phases, a couple in different life phases will not be able to stay together for long. A lack of efficient communication due to different thought processes often separates couples. Particularly when women enter the work market and their younger partners are still in school, conflicts can arise. Thus, the pair will finally give up.

There is no denying that this is a real problem, but my interviewees show me varied strategies for solving the problem rather than leaving the relationship. Since women in this type of relationship are pioneers in exploring the next stage of life, they may intentionally postpone the transition to wait for their male partners. Minor changes in schedules are tactics commonly used by these couples. Jiao told me the strategy they adopt:

“My girlfriend is a graduating senior in college, but I am still in high school. She was planning to go to graduate school right after graduating from college, but we want to stay in school together. Thus, she will take a gap year or two, and we plan to go to the same school. I mean she will go to the graduate school and I will go to college. In this way, we can at least stay in the same life stage as students, for some time.”

This is also a strategy deployed by Ying and her boyfriend, who wants to take a gap year, so that they can enter the labor market together:

“If everything goes well, I will graduate two years earlier than he does; however, then we will face the problem of staying in different life phases. So instead of graduating earlier, we may get married in

school, and I can take a year off and have a baby before I graduate, so that we can probably graduate at around the same time.”

Other than being students together, when women first enter the job market, they are postponing the transition by keeping and simulating their mindsets as students. At the same time, men are preparing themselves for the next stage, too. This is a strategy adopted by Meng and his girlfriend:

“I am graduating next year, but she has been working a year so far. Although I didn’t help her much in finding the job, we explored the job market together, since I will work later anyway. She has not changed much in the first year working, and she spends her spare time with me in school. In the school setting, everyone is still not that selfish and greedy.”

After both people start working, the disparity will be much lessened, and the problem does not seem to be a big issue for them anymore. Especially as the couples become older, the age difference is mitigated, or even dissolved, by the shorter male life expectancy.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion**

#### **Limitations of the Study**

Although I conducted interviews with people of different ages, a sample size of fifteen people may not allow me to make a generalizable conclusion. Even though the interviewees are from different places in China, these interviews were conducted only in Beijing. Since the interviewees had all been staying in Beijing for more than three years, I cannot claim a broader conclusion that can be applied to other parts of China. The basic method for recruiting interviewees was snowball sampling; however, people may have recommended friends who share similar opinions with them. Thus, the ideas may be skewed due to the selection bias.

With regard to the two myths illustrated in the paper, again, the small size of sample does not allow me to draw any definite conclusions to correct the myths. These myths may be found to be true if more people are studied.

This paper is only intended as a preliminary, qualitative investigation into the factors contributing to the emerging mate selection pattern in China; more studies are needed to develop more systematic, precise, detailed, and convincing theories.

## **Concluding thoughts**

In conclusion, women's relationships with younger men are not necessarily a new phenomenon; they have economic and social backgrounds. In my interviews, I identified four strong factors that pull people into these relationships, plus two weak factors that can discourage people from forming this type of relationship.

School remains the major place for people to start their relationships. The increasing female school enrollment rate creates opportunities for young people to meet and develop relationships. Along with the feminist movements, men's preferences for women have changed. Many men are now more attracted to independent and mature women. At the same time, more educated women believe they can earn a living by themselves, so they view a man's solid economic foundation before marriage as a less important criterion. Faced by economic pressure, men tend to marry earlier, so that they can find partners with whom they can manage the pressure together. Contrary to some people's analysis, the one-child policy does not increase the incidence of the Oedipus complex in men; however, the women are typically "babies" who are taken care of by their male partners.

At the same time, there are fewer forces to pull people apart. Due to the imbalanced sex ratio, men are becoming less "picky" and are less likely to leave their relationships. Women, especially women in their mid-twenties, on the other hand, are also less likely to start new relationships because they are afraid of

being “left over”. Less pressure is felt from parents and friends, since this mate selection trend is increasingly popular. Interestingly, many interviewees seem to have a family heritage of women’s relationships with younger men.

In addition to the reasons for this mate selection pattern, two myths were debunked. One well promulgated myth claims there are superior sexual experiences as a result of this mating pattern. However, this may not be true, at least for all people. Another myth involves people’s pessimistic views toward two people in different life stages being together. In fact, couples adopt various strategies to solve this problem.

This paper was conducted in order to discover the reasons for the emerging pattern of men marrying older women in China. Although this marriage format is labeled “brand new” in the media and by many people, I consider it as a practice with its root in the Chinese marriage system of concubines.

As mentioned above, men marrying older women is not necessarily a new phenomenon. People consider it a new issue partially because they do not trace far enough back to Chinese history. True, since the establishment of China and the enactment of the marriage Law, the majority of men marry younger women, which is considered a tradition. However, if we trace back to the Chinese history of concubines, we can find the root of choosing older women as wives.

However, a more important reason for framing the issue as new is that we are living in an era when people are very conscious of differences and rely on labels to differentiate themselves from other people. With the development of scientific technology, a new form of vision has been planted in the modern as well

as the postmodern era. Mass production, the new form of capital, and internationalization creates cultural homogenization. People now from all over the world wear the same brands of clothes, eat the same food, play the same games, and have similar life styles. With the rise of commodification, not only are goods mass produced on the assembly lines, people are also being mass produced. It is this homogeneity that gives rise to the desire of individualization. Labeling is one way among many other ways to achieve individualization. By affiliating oneself with others or differentiating oneself from others, people are actively seeking a special identity within smaller groups. People may not consciously identify themselves under certain labels, but they are fully aware of the features that distinguish them from other people.

Another characteristic of people in the postmodern period is narcissism. People are more and more in need of others' attention. At the same time, people are themselves constantly creating spectacles to attract others' attention. This phenomenon can be seen in the portraits of celebrities in the media. Nowadays, the entire environment we live in is permeated by various kinds of advertisements and spectacles. When these spectacles go upscale, they become what Best and Kellner call "megaspectacles"; they coined the term to illustrate a "significant escalation of the spectacle in size, scope, and intensity" (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 227). The label of the "new marriage pattern" first started and then escalated from stories told in the media, which provide a dramatic portrait of the real issue. We often see stories told in the media about men marrying older women who are five



or ten years older than them; however, the age difference in real life is much smaller.

In short, the lack of reference to Chinese marriage system of concubines, the environment of labeling, and the cultural attraction to spectacles and megaspectacles all contribute to raise considerable attentions to this marriage pattern.

Looking at this partner selection pattern alone, people are tempted to conclude that people are given more choices regarding partner selections. However, I contend that it is too early to make that conclusion. I suspect this pattern is partly a continuation of the traditional concubine system in this era. In the ancient marriage system of concubines, men married older women to take care of the family and to keep the family intact. This notion is illustrated in my interviews, which indicate that many people are seeking comrade-like relationships in the face of economic pressures. The change of preference can be explained as openness to more options with regard to age differences; however, it can also be explained as a forced compromise. The men I interviewed may not have the assets and abilities to find so-called trophy wives. With the emergence of this pattern of women marrying younger men, another phenomenon is emerging at the same time, in which many young girls in their early twenties are marrying or maintaining romantic relationships with successful men in their forties, fifties, or even sixties.

With the co-existence of the two patterns, it is reasonable to believe that Chinese women have been divided into two subgroups, with one group of women

taking the role similar to the wife in the concubine system, and the other group taking the role similar to the concubines in the ancient time. If this is true, then the question of whether people, especially women, are having more opportunities and options in terms of choosing marriages is left open to further discussions.

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