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## Holding Up the Sky? Reflections on Marriage in Contemporary China

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My mother is a matchmaker. She does not make a living at it, but it is one of her greatest hobbies. I grew up in an environment where my mother often brought single people to our house for introductions. It is the Chinese understanding that if you can contribute to the union of two people you will be helping them and, by doing good, accrue virtue yourself. Although my mother had a great influence on my development, socialist Chinese culture also played an important role in shaping my beliefs. Throughout my time at school, it went unquestioned that one should live by socialist morals and seemed natural that adulthood would bring a heterosexual monogamous marriage (complete with a happy family). This type of marriage, rather than a 'traditional'<sup>1</sup> patriarchal marriage arranged by family elders, was the key to social development and stability. Furthermore, the egalitarian philosophy that underlies socialism was supposed to translate to the family unit – i.e. husband and wife should not only care for and respect one another but also share even the most mundane of tasks, such as housework. This view was reinforced by the mass media which would present the stories of exemplary couples whose love had lasted for decades and who supported each other throughout their married lives. Indeed my own parents' marriage exemplified the notion that 'socialist' marriage should be based on love and respect rather than the traditional unions of earlier generations. These influences helped to create my cosy, but naïve, belief that in the People's Republic of China marriage was everyone's destiny and was a relationship built on equality.

'Women hold up half the sky' has been a catchphrase of State officials since the early 1950s and after decades of State propaganda it has been widely accepted that socialism has helped to raise women from the inferior position they held in traditional societies. For instance, women were brought emancipation through their mobilization into paid work and an official ban on arranged marriage. These were supposed to ensure gender equality. When, however, I came to England to do my PhD in Women's Studies, I was confused, pained and shocked by the challenges to my taken-for-granted understanding of Chinese society. By learning feminist theories, I re-examined my past experiences and recognized that, for

example, women do not necessarily need marriage and that the heterosexuality is not the only 'valid' form of human sexuality. Through reading research by western scholars and Chinese scholars now based in the West, my previous assumptions were turned upside down: for example, the one-child policy, highly praised in Chinese textbooks, was criticized for depriving women of reproductive rights. Drawing on recently published research on Chinese female workers (mainly those born during the Maoist period 1949–66) and my own experience, I shall attempt to reassess the issue of marriage in the lives of Chinese women. I hope this short piece will expose the compulsory nature of the gendered rhetoric of marriage in China and show that the socialist ideal of 'equality' in heterosexual marriages does not quite hold true for women.

With the State's determination to promote women's liberation, most able-bodied women born during Mao's chairmanship were allocated a full-time job in the work unit (*danwei*). However, the *danwei* is more than an economic organization. It represents individuals to the State, intervenes in family planning, organizes political studies, carries out State policies and acts as a welfare organization offering a wide range of commodities and services such as housing and medical care (Bian, 1994).

As many scholars have observed, the structure of the *danwei* system is a continuation of thousands of years of agrarian economy and domestic culture (Wang, 1995). The core is a 'patriarchal clan system that centred on the three major principles of honouring the emperor, respecting the father, serving the family' (He, 1987 quoted in Wang, 1998: 109). Hence, workplace management and daily practices are organized to perform familial duty. An example is housing allocation in the work unit. Given the immense population pressures in China, housing is a tight resource in the work unit. In theory, an urban resident who desires public accommodation will be allocated an apartment by application to her or his work unit (Whyte and Parish, 1984; Honig and Hershatter, 1988; Bian, 1994). In practice, this is rarely the case. Yang (1989: 29) cites the 'List of Conditions for the Allocation of Housing' in a state-owned Beijing factory that is used to determine the neediest applicants. The rhetoric of the list is male biased and Number 12 states: 'those who are male workers or staff at this factory' – i.e. implying men are in greater need of accommodation than women. Similarly, 'to avoid duplicate applications [for housing], normally male employees are the only applicants' (Bian, 1994:197). A local women's federation undertook a survey of housing assignments in the city of Shenyang and found there to be a bias in favour of men in all but one of the 30 work units studied, regardless of whether the majority of workers were female (Honig and Hershatter, 1988). Furthermore, in most work units, limited dormitory accommodation is only offered to single men. Single women are advised to stay with their parents for physical safety and so that their reputation is not sullied before they move from their parental house to that of their husband. It would seem that the only way for 'respectable' women to leave their parents' home is to get married, and thus marriage is of greater material significance to women than to men.

In terms of post-nuptial accommodation, gender prejudice in the *danwei* system means that women usually move into their husband's *danwei* housing. If the couple come from different *danwei*, the wife moves into her husband's *danwei* housing, but will continue to work in her original *danwei*; it is very rare for a husband to move into his wife's *danwei* – although that was true for my parents.

Since accommodation is allocated by the work unit, 'neighbours are either their own colleagues, leaders, and acquaintances or those of their spouses or parents' (Shaw, 1996: 59). Women who move into their husbands' *danwei* may find it hard to assimilate into the new community and end up living in a more constricted and isolated social world than that of their spouse. Moreover, women's private lives are subject to constant surveillance and leaders' intervention in the community. Although the state keeps a personal dossier (*dang'an*) on both men and women throughout their lives (using the reports of informers and evaluations made by superiors), women are subject to a wider range of social standards. The traditional Chinese saying that 'men dominate the outside; women dominate the inside' has not faded with the advent of socialism. Women are still considered responsible for areas which men are not, for example doing the housework, maintaining family harmony and educating children. Thus, lived reality does not reflect the official egalitarian ideology. Failure in fulfilling these duties will affect a woman's reputation, be reflected in her *dang'an*, and influence whether she gets job offers, promotions, raises and party membership. Thus, women have to bear not only the physical burden of the housework but also the moral yoke of social expectation.

In the *danwei*, female workers usually marry up (Rofel, 1999); women can raise their social status by marriage while it is disgraceful for men to do so. However, it is nearly impossible for an unmarried woman to move up the workplace hierarchy. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, the chances available to women are connected with the gendered division of labour in the workplace where men are in charge of management and women work on the shop floor. Second, those women who are promoted into managerial sectors are either the wives of officers or are related to men with other influential connections.

Although the *danwei* system is evolving into a less rigid system than that which typified the Maoist period, 'old habits die hard' and many prejudices remain, especially in State-owned enterprises where many women work. There is, for example, a real stigma attached to divorce, and women are subjected to greater pressure to maintain their marriage. I remember my mother often commenting on a couple in her work unit who hated one another with a passion, but still lived side by side in the same house without acknowledging each other's existence. They did not resort to a divorce in order to maintain their reputation and ensure their child had the best future options.

China's one-child policy, introduced in 1979, also impacts more on women. There have been frequent changes in the implementation of the policy over time and couples have been exempted on several grounds, but the policy is generally strictly applied in urban areas (see, for example, Hesketh and Wei, 1997; Doherty

et al., 2001). Women who get pregnant before marriage or after bearing one child in marriage are coerced into undergoing an abortion or face penalties for giving birth, though Hesketh and Wei (1997) say that 'the ugliest aspects of the policy . . . female infanticide, forced abortions, and selective abortion of female fetuses . . . have now disappeared completely in many places'. Doherty et al. (2001), however, have also identified unfavourable consequences for women's use of obstetric health services. Every couple intending to marry must undergo the compulsory pre-marital medical examination in order to rule out genetic diseases and other conditions (such as learning difficulties or psychiatric problems) which might affect parenting abilities and to ensure one healthy baby is born, though marriages do take place without it (Hesketh, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Those who take the One Child Pledge receive rewards (Hesketh and Wei, 1997). Often, though, mothers who give birth to a daughter will suffer emotionally as their in-laws might deem this a failure, since a male heir is preferred, and brand the mothers incapable as a result. Those women born since the 1980s as the one child also face the forthcoming burden of caring for their husband's elderly parents (as is the custom) as well as their own parents. Thus, apart from the ethical issues raised by such surveillance, it is women who undergo all these processes and experience more pressure than their male partners.

Furthermore, although the 'socialist' badge worn by China may create the myth of harmony and equality, domestic violence is not uncommon. Empirical research has shown that wife abuse is 'is not only present, but also prevalent in urban Chinese families' (Xu, 1997: 297). Social activism against domestic violence has increasingly developed since the early 1990s (Milwertz, 2003). It would seem marital relationships in socialist China are not so 'cosy' and 'equal' as state ideology would have us believe.

Despite the unacknowledged problems of marital relationships, the ideology and universality of marriage is still massively influential on young Chinese women (as it was with me), promulgated by the older generation and reinforced in the social and cultural context. People are still busy marrying off the young. Matchmaking has been one of the most important themes in workplace culture, popular with everyone, from *danwei* leaders to ordinary workers (such as my mother). On the official level, matchmaking is regarded as part of the operational duty of the *danwei* system. For instance, 'in some factories and offices, Youth League cadres took the initiative in organizing cultural activities at which young people could meet one another' (Tianjin ribao, 1981 cited in Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 84). This is still part of workplace culture today. My friends in China have difficulty dealing with the matchmaker system that operates in the workplace. Accepting an offer from one workmate might offend another who has also offered. The problem is exacerbated if the matchmaker is your leader. If you accept an offer and start seeing their candidate, the success of your relationship (for example, if it results in marriage) will directly affect your relationship with the matchmaker. It is no surprise that most young people prefer to find a partner in their own social circle.

Matchmakers talk about love coming after marriage and invoke the socialist ideal of love – ‘mutual understanding and affection’ (Evans, 1997: 84) – but the ‘identification of love as the foundation of a successful marriage did not enlighten the [Chinese] public as to how to recognize or define it’ (Evans, 1997: 88). Indeed, the characteristics of love have been subject to various interpretations in accordance with the State’s needs. In the 1950s, ‘sharing the same political and ideological outlook was the most basic condition of love’ (Evans, 1997: 91). In the 1980s, when economic principles were highly promoted, love as a ‘personal’ matter seemed to be less the State’s business: as a result a romantic imagery of love flourished in films, novels and mass media (Evans, 1997: 96).

Given the pressure to marry, it seems that marriage is ingrained in the Chinese psyche. But what of the women who fail to marry? Until recent reforms they had no alternative but to stay at home with their parents. Although private accommodation is now available, the prices are far beyond their means. Furthermore, economic reform will not necessarily relieve the enormous pressure that family, friends and society put on women to marry. Croll (1995) interviewed an older single woman and found that she was treated as odd, was given advice on courtship and introduced to men. This account is confirmed by my own memory. Whenever people talk about older single women, they put on a mysterious face, and talking in a sarcastic tone suggest that ‘they must be weird in character or have some biological problems’. In Chinese culture where people’s privacy is rarely respected, this type of gossip is a weight on older single women and some reluctantly get married to escape the social burden. Conversely, people seem to be more tolerant of single men. For instance the famous Chinese folk expression, *cheng jia li ye* (which refers to setting up a family and establishing a career) is supposed to summarize a person’s life. But its application is gendered. With reference to a woman’s life, the first event will be given priority; with reference to a man’s life, the second event will be given priority. Therefore, in the eyes of society, a single male in his 30s has a career, whereas a single female in her 30s is abnormal. (In the 1990s, there has been growing discussion and recognition of the existence of lesbian and gay relationships, although they continue to meet with disapproval (He, 2001).)

Even today most young Chinese women cannot conceive of themselves as staying single. They have spent their formative years reading romantic novels (as I did) and have or once had idealistic fantasies about their future marital relationship. However, a high proportion of graduates whose relationships at university are based on emotional love end their relationship with their lovers once they leave university. When faced with the difficulty of finding their dream partner, getting a job, fighting with the great social pressure whose patriarchal roots are rarely challenged by socialism, many of them give in and comply with the traditional ideology – that economic and material conditions take priority in the choice of marriage partner. Since emotional attachment and material conditions are hard to obtain together, they settle for second best (material security). Women with high enough qualifications to be independent are not attractive to men. Men

prefer to have higher qualifications than their wives or at least equal education; so the more education women get, the more difficulty they have in finding a husband. I remember a report in a Chinese newspaper, which presented a female PhD student as a laughing stock. She had had to downgrade her qualification several times to a Bachelor's Degree in the marriage adverts in order to get a decent number of responses.

It is no wonder that all my Chinese friends and my parents are concerned about my marital chances. 'Setting me up' has become a major concern for fellow Chinese students at my University in the UK, as both married and unmarried female students are keen to play Cupid. Those students who have not yet worked agree with my priority of emotional attachment when I spurn potential partners suggested by them. In contrast, those who have worked for a few years before coming to England behave like traditional matchmakers: using criteria more akin to finding a job than a life-long partner. For example, they express a lack of understanding when I turn down introductions to men who have PhDs in highly marketable subjects. None replied 'yes' when I asked them if people should get married because of love. Instead they dismiss such notions as 'childish' and 'immature', suggesting that there are 'practical considerations you can't overlook when you *'jin ru she hui'* ('enter society', a metaphor used to describe the transition from leaving university to starting work, implying reality is different from theory). In fact, they joke that 'if you are lucky enough to find someone successful and also you are emotionally attracted to him, you have just won the lottery!' However, a student who stays on in *xiang ya ta* ('the ivory tower'), dealing with books most of the time, has not yet faced the 'real world' and can therefore still indulge in her 'childish' dreams. If, like me, she is studying feminist theories in the West instead of a marketable subject, she is even more unlikely to choose to marry for material reasons, which is what makes me strange to my fellow students. Indeed what makes me even stranger in their eyes is my belief that heterosexual marriage is no longer necessary for my future happiness as I know many older British women who are happy without husbands.

My personal reflections and consideration of the literature offer a challenge to the notion that socialism has improved the marital life of Chinese women. Although economic reform is taking place in China and this offers young women more employment opportunities (though higher managerial positions are still occupied by men), the reform will not necessarily bring about changes in marital ideology. Moreover, many researchers have already shown that the re-emergence of a civil society arising from the withdrawal of the State has offered a chance of re-traditionalization that disadvantages women (Shang, 1996). This short article has revealed some of the reality of Chinese women's marital life and raised the awareness of the effects of 'socially compulsory' marriage on Chinese women. Enlightened by feminist theories, Chinese Studies, and my new more broad and liberal outlook, I have begun to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions instilled in me from an early age that I would, in the fullness of time, get married. We are entitled to make our own choices.

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## NOTES

1. In traditional marriage women were treated as if they were their husbands' property. In socialist marriage equality within the family is the ideal, although in reality it is rarely realized.
2. From October 1 2003, new Chinese rules on marriage have been in effect. The application procedure for marriage has been simplified. The pre-marital medical check-up became voluntary.

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