

Mate Selection and Gender Reflexivity: The Emphasis of *Gan jue* and the Emergence of a New Generational Pattern of Intimacy in Contemporary China*

Jing Zheng
Shenzhen University, China

Abstract

Existing literature has pointed to the dilemmas encountered by many women in the current Chinese marriage market, which mainly result from the conflict between the elevated status of women and the engrained patriarchal gender ideology. However, less is known about women's mate selection concerns which have been shaped by this context. This article contributes to the field in two aspects. First, it demystifies *gan jue* (feelings), which is a central discourse in contemporary Chinese young people's mate choice criteria and, yet, a discourse that has received inadequate attention in existing literature on courtship and marriage in current Chinese society. Second, from the perspective of gender reflexivity, the present study elaborates on how the emphasis on *gan jue* in young women's mate selection concerns questions gender normativity and indicates the emergence of a new generational pattern of intimacy in China.

Key words

mate selection, *gan jue* (feelings), gender reflexivity, China

Introduction

Recent literature has highlighted the conflict between the elevated status of women and the engrained patriarchal gender ideology, indicating that this is the major reason why many Chinese women encounter situations of being stranded in the marriage market (Hong Fincher, 2014; Ji, 2015; To, 2013; Zhang & Sun, 2014). However, knowledge is insufficient in terms of modern Chinese women's mate selection concerns in this context. This article contributes to the field in two aspects. First, it demystifies *gan jue* (feelings), which is a central discourse that has appeared in contemporary

* This work was supported by Shenzhen University under Grant 85202-17QNFC48.

Chinese young people's articulations of mate choice criteria and yet which is a discourse that has received inadequate attention in existing literature on courtship and marriage in current Chinese society (Bøe, 2013; Farrer, 2014; Sun, 2012; To, 2013; Zhang & Sun, 2014). The term *gan jue* basically focuses on emotion; thus, it partly derives from the notion of intimacy or affection, which has served as one of the core elements for relationship formation in China since the May Fourth Movement in the early twentieth century (Pan, 1993; Yan, 2003). However, what distinguishes *gan jue* from the old discourse of affection is that it also holds many elements together and it shows the interconnectedness of these elements in modern Chinese individuals' ideals about mate choice. Also, in the analysis of courtship culture in current Chinese society, local studies (Chi, 2010; Huang, 2008; Qian, Wang, Zhang, & Song, 2003; Xu, 2004) tend to criticize the trend that, under the context of marketization, women follow the logic of materialism and pay increasing attention to a potential mate's socio-economic status and property. In foregrounding *gan jue*, this article goes beyond such perspectives and seeks to deepen the understanding of Chinese women's mate selection concerns. Second, from the perspective of gender reflexivity, the present study elaborates on how the emphasis on *gan jue* in young women's mating concerns indicates the emergence of a new generational pattern of intimacy in China. The relevant gender role negotiation examined in this study questions gender normativity and reflects modern Chinese women's changing expectations of marriage; it is no longer a relationship based on *making a mundane living together* (*da huo guo ri zi*)—rather, it is an intimate bond that embodies many of their desires in life.

Literature Review

Most existing studies on gender reflexivity build their discussion upon gendering and modernizing Bourdieu's (1998) original work on reflexivity. Acknowledging that such a reflexive stance helps to illustrate the synchronicity of constraint and freedom in women's gender role negotiation, feminist engagement with Bourdieu's works goes beyond the original thesis in several aspects. For example, most scholarly works engaging with Bourdieu's work foreground in their critiques the observation that Bourdieu underestimates the impact of context and social changes on individuals'—especially women's—exertion of agency in dealing with gender relations.

For instance, agreeing with Bourdieu's stance on the habituated nature of reflexive practices, Adkins (2004) further points out that gender is extraordinarily relational and flexible, with its value and effects varying from context to context or from field to field. Similarly, Chambers (2005) maintains that although all fields embody gender rules, gender norms vary across different fields and even across different groups within a certain field. Kenway and McLeod (2004) also argue that women change and are changed by gender relations within existing fields, as well as by new social fields. Insisting that gender "operates across fields" (Chambers, 2005, p. 326), these scholars stress the strength of gender in critical reflexivity. Besides this, they also emphasize that relevant struggles of gender reflexivity are not just between the two sexes, but also within the same gender group in which individuals have different spaces and resources (McNay, 1999).

Regarding the ingrained nature of male dominant gender norms illustrated in Bourdieu's (2001) thesis, while acknowledging women's agency in resistance towards these norms, many scholars also admit that such an endeavor always "operates within constraints" (Huppertz, 2009, p. 61). Bourdieu (2001) argues that women tend to encounter *double bind* in the gendered agency exertion, that is, "if they behave like men, they risk losing the obligatory attributes of 'femininity' and call into question the natural right of men to the positions of power; if they behave like women, they appear incapable and unfit for the job" (2001, p. 67). Extending Bourdieu's argument, Chambers (2005) maintains that gendered habitus cannot be significantly undermined by mobility across fields, because gender also operates across fields. Adkins (2004) warns that reflexivity should not be confused with the freedom to question and break the norms that previously governed gender; it is more likely to be linked to the reworking and refashioning of gender. In her empirical study in the field of sport and physical culture, Thorpe (2009) also finds that while the social context offers some opportunities for women to use their feminine capital to their advantage, it demonstrates ongoing sexism and ideological constraints towards women. These insights and findings are important in that they reveal the difficulties lying in the path of women's gender role negotiation within and across differing socio-cultural fields.

Specifically in the case of China, existing literature suggests that the tradition of patriarchal culture does not disappear in contemporary society

(Farrer, Suo, Tsuchiya, & Sun, 2012; Hong Fincher, 2014; To, 2013). Some empirical studies also provide examples that illustrate how gender reflexivity and consequential gender role negotiations are difficult to achieve. For instance, scholars find that even though women succeed in destabilizing the gender norms in certain fields (e.g., in the educational system and the job market), strategically or involuntarily they also entrench the male dominant norms in fields like courtship and dating (Ji, 2015; Liu, 2014). In this article, I further demonstrate how the tradition of patriarchal culture becomes a complex resource through which women make sense of their gender identities in their mate selection process. While the *natural* sex differences and women's family-oriented disposition are still emphasized in post-socialist Chinese society (Liu, 2014; Wu, 2012), there emerges a neoliberal-style discourse on women's individualized selfhood, which provides a glimpse of the renegotiation and potential redefinition of womanhood in China (Gaetano, 2014). Such contradictory discourses are especially conspicuous in the life experiences of women who belong to the post-80s generation of only children. While still being influenced by the traditional patriarchal culture, they are also influenced by globalization and westernized culture. Compared to their parents, they are more self-oriented, conscious of rights, and risk-averse, especially when dealing with their parents and loved ones in the private sphere (Cameron, Erkal, Gangadharan, & Meng, 2013; Cao, 2009; Yan, 2006). Also, the post-80s are the first batch of young women who benefit from a series of social structural changes in China's modernization process. For example, factors like the one-child policy, market-oriented economic reform, and the expansion of the middle class job market all facilitate the empowerment of this particular group of women (Tsui & Rich, 2002; Zhang & Sun, 2014). Therefore, compared to the situation in which traditional Chinese family ethics promoted mundane marital life (*da huo guo ri zhi*) and women in the Mao era were bound by unitary mating standards that prioritized one's political status and family background (Xu, 2004; Zhang, 2013), these women have expanding and more idiosyncratic expectations when it comes to mate selection. Using the example of these young women's pursuits of *gan jue* in their mate choice journey, I discuss how their relevant gender role negotiations offer the basis for a reflexive critique of gender normativity in China.

Research Site

The data in this article is derived from my research project about women's mate selection experiences in contemporary Chinese society. This research took place in Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong province located in southern China. I chose Guangzhou as the research site for two reasons. First, according to the statistics in 2010, the number of single women in Guangzhou ranked the third highest in China, behind Beijing and Shanghai.¹ When it comes to women's mating ideologies in Guangzhou, results of a 2014 survey indicated that 73.17% of Guangzhou women insist on remaining unmarried until finding the loved one; this answer ranked first compared to women from other parts of China.² In a place where the influence of commercialization is ubiquitous and the ideology of pragmatism is highly valued,³ women's persistence in their pursuits of love gives rise to an interesting and puzzling picture. Second, although Guangzhou is regarded as one of first-tier cities together with Shanghai and Beijing and it also functions as an important financial and cultural center in China, this southern city is less researched than its two counterparts in existing literature on courtship and marriage in contemporary Chinese society (e.g., Bøe, 2013; Farrer, 2014; Sun, 2012; To, 2013; Zhang & Sun, 2014). Therefore, situated in Guangzhou, this study facilitates our understanding of social life in Chinese big cities in the context of a changing socio-structural and cultural environment.

¹ I conducted the fieldwork in 2012. The 2010 statistics were the most up-to-date information I could obtain at that time. The statistics are from the report "Cities Index of Single Population" issued by jia Yuan.com, a well-known matchmaking website in China, based on a statistical analysis of its 22 million members.

² This is a 2014 online survey on single women's mating ideologies. The survey was conducted by zhenai.com—the largest matchmaking website in China—among its 80 million members. One of the survey items was about the attitude of "remaining unmarried until finding the loved one." Overall, 68.3% of its female respondents agreed with this statement. Specifically, 73.17% Guangzhou women agreed with this statement, ranking participants from Guangzhou as those most likely to hold this position compared to women in other parts of China.

³ Due to its advantageous geographical and political location, Guangdong province has been allowed to implement special policies in the post-Mao regime and to move one step ahead of the country to experience reforms and opening up. The influence of marketization and globalization has been felt earlier and stronger in this area compared to elsewhere in the country. There is even a popular saying in China "east, south, west, north, central, come to Guangdong to make big money" (*dong nan xi bei zhong, fa cai dao Guangdong*).

Method

From August 2011 to December 2012, I conducted in-depth interviews with 36 women for data collection. The majority of participants were in their late 20s or early 30s. Thirty-one of them were born after China's post-socialist market-oriented reforms began in 1978. Table 1 provides descriptive information about these 36 participants.

Table 1.
Sample Description (N=36)

Characteristic	N	%
Educational attainment		
Bachelor degree or above	25	70
Associate degree	8	22
High school diploma	2	5
Junior high school diploma	1	3
Field of employment		
Sales and office	19	53
Management and professional	7	20
Production and service	6	17
Postgraduate student	4	10
Relationship status		
Single	24	67
In a relationship	3	8
Married	6	17
Divorced	3	8
Age		
Mean age	28.7	
Standard deviation	3.6	

Participants in the study were recruited mainly through the following four channels. First, I reached out to my friends and their social networks to find four research participants. Second, I posted a research participant recruitment advertisement on my personal page of the micro-blog, Sina Weibo (<http://weibo.com>), which is one of the most popular networking

sites in China. Three women initiated contact with me and said that they were willing to participate in the study. Third, I contacted the executives of two popular matchmaking websites in China (jiayuan.com and zhenai.com) and found three participants with their help. Fourth, I found three participants during my participant observation on matchmaking activities. In the following stage of data collection, I made use of the key participants found via these four channels and adopted snowball sampling to expand the number of research participants.

Among the 36 in-depth interviews, 30 were face-to-face, most of which averaged around two hours in duration. Interviews were conducted in places chosen by the participants. Besides face-to-face interviews, I also conducted six online in-depth interviews, as proposed by participants. These women requested online interviews for different reasons such as privacy concerns, timetable clashes because of frequent business trips, and a personal preference for online interview which provided a more relaxed communication environment for them. These six interviews were carried out in the form of online chats via QQ.⁴ I conducted multiple interviews with five participants to clarify the data and enrich the content of the emerging themes.⁵ In order to ensure that key issues of the research were addressed, I used an interview guide as a reference in both the face-to-face interviews and the online interviews. However, great flexibility was allowed during all these interviews. All interviews were conducted in Chinese. For ethical considerations, all names are pseudonyms. Several participants required me to conceal their demographic details to better ensure confidentiality. Accordingly, I suppressed these details in my research reports and relevant publications.

⁴ QQ is an abbreviation of Tencent QQ, which is a popular instant messaging software service used by many people in China.

⁵ In general, there were three reasons for these follow-up interviews. First, one participant had many relevant stories to share and we were not able to schedule enough time for all of these in the first interview. Second, three women contacted me and discussed follow-up stories regarding the matchmaking experiences they shared in our first interviews. Third, one informant introduced her friend to participate in my research and she accompanied this woman to the interview; she also contributed more of her stories while I interviewed her friend.

Findings

In this study, a subtle term *gan jue* frequently appeared in almost all participants' articulations when they expressed their expectations about their future or ideal partner. The definition of feelings in mate selection varied among different women. It could be *the impulse to be together*, or *my cup of tea*, or *we can communicate*, or *the sense that I'll be happy with him*, etc. For some interviewees, they could not even explain this term in detail, but they still insisted that it is an indispensable factor in deciding to develop a relationship with a man.

Based on the examples provided by participants in the present research, I endeavor to demystify *gan jue* and summarize elements that constitute this central discourse in Chinese women's mate choice considerations. Through the lens of gender reflexivity, I also look at how these women's emphasis on *gan jue* in their mate selection rewrites the script of (heterosexual) intimate relationships in Chinese society.

Elements Constituting *Gan jue* in Chinese Women's Mate Selection Concerns

Affection. Echoing the “emotional expressivity” put forward by Evans (2010, p. 983) and the affective turn suggested by other sociologists (e.g., Gabb, 2008) to address transformed intimate and interpersonal relationships in contemporary society, findings in this research suggest that the desire for affection is well-expressed and openly celebrated by modern Chinese women in their mate selection. Affection is the central factor constituting *gan jue*. This phenomenon challenges the sole “market exchange” ethos of neoliberalism (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 5). Emotion is not downplayed, although material concerns are often foregrounded in the contemporary neoliberal Chinese context, which is permeated by market logic (Zheng, 2015); rather, emotion appears as a parallel to individuals' commercial, professional, and social opportunities (Evans, 2010). In the post-80s generation, who are influenced by globalization and who are more “westernized” than their parents (Yan, 2006, p. 256), the shift in their mate choice ideal from emphasizing *en ai* (an affection based on the gratitude of supporting each other in everyday life, derived from Chinese traditional family ethics) to advocating *romantic love* (ideology imported from the West) in marriage/relationships (Pan, 1993) is especially obvious. A representative

case is that St. Valentine's Day is clearly more popular among the young than the Chinese Lovers' Day—Qixi festival—among young adults and adolescents (Ye, 2010).

Many participants in the study highlighted the central role of affection in their mate selection criteria. For example, Emma, a 30-year-old advertisement sales executive, directly mentioned that she intended to find someone she loves *very, very much*:

I have so many suitors. The youngest is in junior high school, while the oldest already has one foot in the grave. But I won't marry unless I find someone whom I love very, very much. Otherwise, it'll be a sadness in my life. If only he's in love (and I don't love him), that's definitely not enough.

Another participant, Liang, a 31-year-old civil servant, also emphasized love in her mating ideals. She has been divorced once. In the interview, she frankly admitted that the reason for her divorce was that she fell in love with another man. Even though she did not end up with that man, she did not regret it and still insisted on the idea that love comes first in decision-making about her remarriage, though this thought is criticized by some people around her:

Some people, especially my parents and their friends, said that I'm silly. They urged me to be more practical and to give up my romantic dream. According to them, love doesn't last long; the ending of every relationship is *zuo shou wo you shou*⁶ and *chai mi you yan jiang cu cha*⁷; marriage is just to find someone to live a mundane life together with (*da huo guo ri zi*). (Interviewer: What do you think?) Well, I don't agree with the idea that you can marry someone you don't love. For me, I must find the one who

⁶ *Zuo shou wo you shou*: literally translates as "the left hand holds the right hand", which means numbness. This popular term is often used to describe the situation that passion fades out in a long-term intimate relationship.

⁷ *Chai mi you yan jiang cu cha*: "(Marriage is mostly just) firewood, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, and tea." This is a Chinese proverb. The sentence includes seven necessities in family life, implying that marital life is mundane.

attracts me very much. If the chemistry between us gradually fades, this is something I can't control. But we must love each other in the beginning. I can't develop a relationship with a man just for the sake of marriage. I won't make such a compromise.

It is worth mentioning that the emphasis on *gan jue*, in which affection is foregrounded, could also serve as a stigma reduction strategy adopted by some single women when they are criticized by the media and the public for being too *picky* and *materialistic* in their mate selection. The central discourse of *gan jue* in their mate selection concerns suggests that they consciously avoid downgrading themselves as slaves to pragmatism and proudly distinguish themselves from women who are satisfied with the conventional pattern of intimacy that centers on *making a mundane living together* (*da buo guo ri zhi*).

Physical Attractiveness. When explaining the term *gan jue*, many participants also brought up their concerns about a future/ideal partner's physical attractiveness. Although the traditional mating ideology of *men's money and women's beauty* (*nan cai nü mao*) still exerts an impact in some people's mate choice practices (Zheng, 2015), when it comes to mating preferences and criteria, participants' articulations obviously indicate that physical attraction is a crucial factor when contemporary Chinese women assess a man's suitability as a potential partner. Although the traits of an ideal male partner in participants' descriptions still echo what evolutionary theories suggest (Kenrick, 1994), these women's frankness with which they express their requirements for men's physical attractiveness conveys a message that the pursuit of beauty is important in their mate selection strategy.

In July 2014, an online debate participated by 96,000 people and entitled *Chinese men are not good enough for Chinese women* attracted large-scale social attention.⁸ This issue was initiated by some women who complained that with their untidy appearance and uncouth demeanor, many Chinese men could not make a good match with stylish and cosmopolitanized Chinese women. The number of netizens who voted for this viewpoint were five

⁸ The debate and relevant discussion was held on weibo.com. By August 14, 2014, 41,681,000 people had viewed the original webpage. 96,000 netizens participated in the discussion; 47,530 people voted to support this viewpoint; 9,852 voted against it.

times that of those who voted against it. A follow-up survey found that almost 60% of female respondents supported such an observation and judgment (Xue, 2014). This figure further shows the rising standards regarding physical attractiveness held by modern Chinese women towards their (potential) partners.

The stories of two participants, Kit (a 30-year-old civil servant) and Zhen (a 29-year-old assistant accountant), serve as good examples to illustrate this phenomenon. These two women specifically brought up a popular term *wai mao xie hui* to describe their strict requirements of a male candidate's appearance and physical attractiveness. *Wai mao xie hui*, literally translates as *good-looks club* and is a term referring to individuals who place a high value on others' appearances. For these women, if a man could not attract them physically in the first place, they would not have sufficient enthusiasm to have a second date with him. Kit shared with me a vivid story about this:

That guy was introduced by my father's friend. I was told that he graduated from Peking University and was quite accomplished in his career. We started chatting online without exchanging photos. You know, it's embarrassing to ask people for their photos when you just start chatting. I found that we shared a lot in common and it was a really nice experience chatting with him. Thus, I agreed when he proposed a face-to-face date. Now, thinking back, I was so right to bring a friend with me for that date. You know what? When I arrived at the restaurant and looked at him from far away, I wanted to run away! Right away! (Interviewer: what happened?) Do you know Yu Fa from Stephen Chow's movie?⁹ Wow, he looked exactly like that! No kidding! And he had a beard, looked like an old guy. Wow, I really wanted to leave! You know, I belong to *wai mao xie hui*. But I thought it's impolite to do so; thus, I could only brave it out.

Zhen also had the experience of turning down men who were, in her words, "sorry-looking" on blind dates. She firmly believed that her being

⁹ Yu Fa: a character in Stephen Chow's comedy *Hail the Judge*. The character is a funny-looking woman. The comedy is popular and Yu Fa has become a word to describe a bad-looking woman.

“picky” about men’s appearances is justifiable, because it is related to relationship quality in the long run:

Think about it. You’re going to spend the rest of your life with this guy. You’re going to look at his face for your whole life! If you two don’t have chemistry even in the early stage of the relationship, how are you going to live with him for so many years? [...] If I don’t like a guy at first sight, he can’t please me anymore, no matter what he does.

Based on the participants’ feedback, in general there are several aspects that often affect Chinese women’s judgment of a man’s physical attractiveness: height, body shape, voice, manner, and dress style. Among these, height was the most frequently mentioned *non-negotiable* criterion. Almost all informants expected their partners to be taller than them. They also gave many examples of appearance and manners of men that they found unacceptable or annoying: Baldness and fat belly, too skinny, husky voice, taking off shoes right after sitting down, etc. Shan, a 30-year-old operations manager, gave a quite representative answer of the interviewees:

I pay a lot of attention to my own image, thus I hope my partner can have a good taste as well [...] However, the bad thing is an important issue. They think as long as they are capable and economically accomplished, that’s ok. Many women would admire them. In fact, this is not true. But we don’t ask for too much, either. We just want to bring out a boyfriend who doesn’t look lousy and who doesn’t make us lose face.

These words obviously indicate that the pursuit of beauty in mate choice is no longer a privilege reserved only for men. Modern Chinese women can also use the sexual capital of men. They protest against traditional mating ideologies that do not hold high standards for men’s appearance and demeanor. Also, compared to the situation in which men’s political status, educational attainment, and economic accomplishments were predominant factors in women’s mating considerations in the Mao era, in the 1980s and 1990s (Xu, 2004) the incorporation of men’s physical attractiveness as a key factor in the mate selection *checklist* of women who are empowered by their

rising socio-economic status is a new change in modern Chinese mating culture.

Shared Values. Shared values, interests, and lifestyle were also mentioned by many participants when they referred to *gan jue*. Most of these women associated such desires with the term *men dang hu dui*. Literally translated as “matching doors and parallel windows,” this well-known term emphasizes the compatibility of family background, mainly in terms of social status and economic resources, in traditional Chinese mating ideology. Findings in the current research suggest that for many Chinese (female) individuals, “similar backgrounds” is still an ingrained criterion for mate choice. However, in the conventional sense, this mating ideology only stresses the importance of well-matched economic background and material resources. When *men dang hu dui* was brought up by many informants during the interviews, it encompassed a broader sense of meaning and it presented a more complicated picture of people’s perceptions and practices in mate selection. In the stories of many participants, *men dang hu dui* was more often related to similar values and lifestyle, which exert determining influences on the harmony and sustainability of an intimate relationship.

Shuang, a 32-year-old supply manager, gave some examples of shared values and lifestyle:

For instance, my mom leads quite a bourgeois lifestyle. She loves indulging herself. She spends a lot on travel, dining, and clothing. My dad is different. He’s very cautious about spending money. My mom asked him to dine out with her. He rejected her and said it’s a waste of money. Our family is in fact quite well off, but he still feels financially insecure. Now that he’s retired, he still works part-time and tries to make more money. They don’t have shared values [...] (The case of) my aunt and uncle is totally different. They live in Shenzhen. During weekend, they often go to Hong Kong together, exploring good food there. Sometimes they travel a long way just to have a bowl of wonton noodles. Others may think it’s not worth it, but this pair enjoys it very much [...] This is what I want. I want someone who can hang out with me. We should have similar lifestyles and similar values.

Fei, a 25-year-old financial assistant, mentioned that she once turned down a man with whom she couldn't communicate:

Although he's rather mature and thoughtful, I didn't have *gan jue* towards him. We have very different values. (Interviewer: Can you give an example?) He comes from a cadre family. Like his parents, he admires Chairman Mao. He takes pride in being a disciplined student while he was in college, saying that he never skipped any classes [...] He's also very loyal to the Communist Party. Well, I admit that I am still a bit rebellious at this stage, so [...] Anyway, we couldn't communicate. I didn't keep in touch with him after our first date.

Some interviewees also talked about the importance of cultural compatibility in developing and maintaining a successful intimate relationship. They wanted their partners to share values and interests with them, which, in their eyes, is the foundation of a good relationship. Ning, a 29-year-old social worker, specifically mentioned that her family did not understand her career choice. She therefore emphasized mutual understanding in a relationship and hoped that her future partner could support her work:

Social work is a new thing in China. It's not well established at this moment. We don't earn much. Many people don't understand this career, either. For example, my elder brother is a civil servant. He often urged me to apply for jobs in government like he did, saying that there's no hope for me taking a low-paying job like a social worker position [...] If I also have to explain to my partner, the most intimate person in my life, about why I chose this career, it's tiring, isn't it? Thus I have to find a partner who has similar values.

The above cases indicate a shift from stressing only well-matched family background to also emphasizing similar values and personal lifestyles in mating ideologies, which reflects a generational change which foregrounds *self-centrism* rather than *family-centrism* in women's mate selection process.

Respect for Women’s Need for Egalitarianism. The need for egalitarianism in mate selection refers to women’s expectation of finding a partner who can recognize and appreciate their self-value, help them with their self-actualization, and enrich their lives. Such a conception of and insistence on individuality in a (potential) relationship resonates with the emergence of “self-managing, autonomous, and enterprising” subjects under the neoliberal context (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 5), which is also a signifier of women’s increased self-awareness in modern China (Gaetano, 2014).

One of the participants, Shan, the 30-year-old operations manager, used Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” to illustrate this point:

Different women want different things [...] some may think that if a man could provide her with some material things and a sense of security, that’s enough. But we’re different. What we want is self-actualization. When I’m with a man, I want to feel that I have self-value and he values who I am. I hope we can have mutual appreciation.

Several participants in the present study illustrated women’s need for egalitarianism in mate choice through the example of encouragement in their career accomplishment. All of the participants are dedicated career women, and they want to find a partner who is also highly motivated and who can appreciate their ambitions in both career and life. Shuang, the 32-year-old supply manager, gave an example of what these women want in a desired intimate relationship:

I’m aggressive in my career. I want a good life, so I work very hard, trying my best to be promoted and earn more money. I don’t want a man who tells me “oh, baby, your work is so demanding” or “how about transferring to an easier job?” I hope to find a partner who can work together with me to strive for a better life.

Not only do these women challenge the traditional gender stereotypes of women’s dependence on men in an intimate/marital relationship, more importantly, they highlight women’s self-value and self-making need in rela-

tionship formation. For these women with career accomplishments and mature mentalities, the prerequisite for a quality intimate relationship should be full recognition of their self-value. They challenge the “deficit identity” (Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007, p. 4) that is often attached to single women. Their confident articulations indicate that they already enjoy a full identity and have the competence to lead a meaningful single life. When entering a relationship, not only would they refuse to give up their individuality, they also aim higher and expect that partners to help them to refine their self-construction. Liang, the 31-year-old civil servant, provided a good elaboration of such a desire:

I think that if two people become a couple, it should be like “one plus one equals three.” We both have a meaningful single life and we’re attracted to each other because of our own charm and wonderful lifestyle. This is the reason why we should be together. Even if we’re apart one day, we can still have our own meaningful lives, but our life together makes the world more beautiful. I think the best kind of relationship should be like this.

However, some participants also mentioned that their need for egalitarianism often lands them in embarrassing situations in mate selection. They found that most men they met and/or dated were still looking for a potential partner who were willing to take up the subordinate role traditionally expected of females. Even though most of these men do not want—or may not be able—to support a housewife, they still prefer a partner who is less ambitious in career development so that she can have more time and energy to devote to the family. The conflict between these women’s needs and the male candidates’ expectations is often the reason why they find it difficult to find a suitable partner. This phenomenon echoes findings in previous studies that the tradition of patriarchal culture does not disappear in contemporary society (Hong Fincher, 2014; To, 2013).

Nonetheless, under such circumstances, quite a number of participants held a “no compromise” stance towards their mate selection requirements and insisted that they would not get married simply for the sake of it, despite the risk of being associated with the unfavorable “deficit identity” (Reynolds et al., 2007, p. 4) and being stigmatized by the general public as too finicky (Hong Fincher, 2014). Their insistence may serve as an ex-

ample that shows how post-socialist Chinese feminine roles are different from those in traditional society and the socialist era. In the past, Chinese traditional womanhood was monolithically defined by the role of the *virtuous wife and good mother* (*xian qi liang mu*), which conformed to the Confucian gender ethics and patriarchal family system. In the Mao era, when gender equality and women empowerment were promoted as socio-political tasks for national development, socialist femininity was singularly characterized by an androgynous image of iron women. Chinese women in the post-socialist era, however, are “encouraged to indulge in the possibilities and pleasures of feminine expressions within a context of greater freedom” (Liu, 2014, p. 20). They are more empowered in both educational attainment and in the job market. Their expectations towards intimate relationships and towards themselves in such relationships have, therefore, increased. Modern Chinese women are more conscious of their self-value in every aspect of life, including dating and marriage. They desire to be the protagonist, rather than performing the supporting role in intimate relationships.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study shows that the frequent appearance of the term *gan jue* in modern Chinese young women’s articulations of their mating concerns reflects a new generational pattern of intimacy. Through probing the elements constituting *gan jue*, I find that there are three characteristics of this new script of intimacy.

The first one is the increased emphasis on affection in young individuals’ mating selection concerns. For these young Chinese individuals (most of whom belong to the post-80s generation), mate selection has gone beyond the conventional purpose of *marrying a bread earner* (*jia han jia ban, chuan yi chi fan*). Marriage is no longer the means of survival as it once was. *Gan jue* hardly appeared on the mating checklist in their parents’ generation, when mating ideology emphasized political class background (Zhang, 2013; Zhang & Sun, 2014) and prioritized the purpose of upward social mobility under the context of extreme societal instability during Cultural Revolution (Egri & Ralston, 2004). In mate selection and marital life, these young Chinese individuals also dream beyond the conventional pattern of intimacy that centers on mundane marital life. Specifically for young Chinese wom-

en, even though the material condition of the potential partner is still crucial in their mate choice considerations, their material concern in courtship relates more to solidifying commitments in the precarious post-socialist environment (Farrer, 2011) than to the traditional intimacy pattern of *making a living together* (*da huo guo ri zǐ*).

Second, the increased equality between the two sexes is also a crucial factor of this new generational pattern of intimacy. This characteristic especially helps to distinguish *gan jue* from the notion of affection in Chinese courtship culture (Pan, 1993; Yan, 2003). Besides the desire for affection, emphasis on *gan jue* in modern Chinese women's mate selection also relates to their cultural compatibility concerns, their requirements of the potential mate's physical attractiveness, and their need for egalitarianism in an intimate relationship. In their pursuit of equality and their demands about a male partner's physical attractiveness, they question gender normativity and thereby challenge the traditional male dominant and privileged role in the fields of courtship and marriage.

Third, there is increased agency in modern Chinese individuals' pursuit of love. This is mainly reflected in the change in the central grammatical term in everyday Chinese romantic talk. Farrer (2002, 2011) found that in 1990s and early 2000s, Chinese young people tended to use the discourse of *yuan/yuan fen* (karmic destiny) in their conversations about love and relationships, which ascribes "a transcendental or mystical quality to feelings" (2002, p. 197) and functions as an indirect way of emphasizing the emotional content of a relationship (2011). The shift from waiting for *yuan/yuan fen* to pursuing *gan jue* in contemporary Chinese people's articulations of their relationship ideal reflects more agency and proactivity in their practices of mate selection and relationship formation.

Findings in the present research also provide examples of how young Chinese women's gender reflexivity is influenced by the context of Chinese modernity and the one-child policy. Most of the participants belong to the post-80s generation. They are the only children in their families. This could be one of the major reasons why they have different expectations of relationships and marriage compared to those of women in the Mao era, who mostly had siblings and grew up in a collectivistic culture (Zhong, Wang, & Di, 2001). The disposition of self-centrism derived from their early experiences as well-off, only children who are exposed to Western individualistic culture (Cameron et al., 2013; Cao, 2009; Yan, 2006) may also account for

their *picky* mating standards and their resistance towards the imbalanced gender rules in the marriage market.

Echoing the literature which shows that struggles of gender reflexivity are also within the same gender group in which individuals have different spaces and resources (McNay, 1999) and that the single women (leftover women) phenomenon in China is a class-specific one (Zhang & Sun, 2014), it must be highlighted that most of the participants who emphasized *gan jue* in mate selection are middle-class, educated career women who are financially independent. For participants with lower socioeconomic status, although sometimes they also brought up *gan jue* when talking about their relationship ideal, they paid relatively more attention to men's material resources in their mate choice consideration. As the middle-class women do not need to depend on a male partner for the necessities of life, they desire a partner who can fulfill their psychological needs such as love, passion, sense of belonging, intimacy, etc. However, as some recent studies suggest, the traditional male-dominated gender norms are still engrained in current Chinese society. Thus, there exists a problematic reality that the more accomplished a woman is, the more difficulties she may encounter in her mate selection journey (Hong Fincher, 2014; Ji, 2015; To, 2013; Zhang & Sun, 2014). Although the young women in this new generation are able to express higher and more idiosyncratic mate choice standards, the plight they face in the marriage market reflects the gender inequality perpetuated in the Chinese marriage market. Under such circumstances, in the present research, among the 36 interviewees, 11 women mentioned that if an ideal relationship seems unlikely, they would prefer to be self-reliant and to maintain an independent lifestyle as opposed to a traditional partnership—at least, this is the case when they are in their late twenties and/or early thirties. Judging from this stance, compared to women in previous generations who tended to marry in their early twenties because of socio-political culture and pressure (Parish, Laumann, & Mojola, 2007; Wang & Yang, 1996), they possess more breathing space in their mate choice journey, though this respite may only be temporary due to their fertility concerns and the insufficient institutional support for out-of-wedlock childbearing in China (Zheng, 2015). Moreover, since engrained patriarchal gender norms still exert conspicuous effects in current Chinese society, these women's higher expectations toward intimate relationships entail greater risks of them being “leftover” in the marriage market. Participants in this study are

conscious of this reality and they have weighed up the alternative of early marriage. However, even though facing a situation of being stranded in the mate selection process, many of them are not willing to lower their mating standards or give up their pursuit of *gan jue* in relationship formation. With higher opportunity cost in the marriage market, these women are actually pioneering another option for unmarried women in China. If such a *no compromise* stance is not representative of their future action, it at least can be seen as a gendered symbolic resource that could create some space for further empowerment of modern Chinese women.

Finally, I must acknowledge the limitations of this research, which is based on qualitative data of a limited sample size. Based on voluntary participants' articulations, the applicability of the findings in the present study to individuals who do not feel comfortable with volunteering to participate in studies on women's mate selection experience is unclear. Due to this limitation, the conclusions are made cautiously and the interpretations cannot be generalized. Also, the study is contextualized in Guangzhou, a first-tier city in China. The majority of the participants are college-educated career women. However, a deeper and more thorough understanding of how modernity and marketization shape and reshape Chinese women's mate choice concerns and practices of intimacy would require more studies, especially ones conducted in less developed regions and featuring women of lower socioeconomic status.

References

- Adkins, L. (2004). Introduction: Feminism, Bourdieu and after. In L. Adkins & B. Skeggs (Eds.), *Feminism after Bourdieu* (pp. 3-18). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bøe, C. A. (2013). *Women and family in contemporary urban China: Contested female individualisation* (Master's thesis). The University of Bergen, Bergen.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *State nobility: Elite schools in the field of power*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine domination*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cameron, L., Erkal, N., Gangadharan, L., & Meng, X. (2013). Little emperors: Behavioral impacts of China's one-child policy. *Science*, 339(6122), 953-957.
- Cao, J. (2009). The analysis of tendency of transition from collectivism to individualism in China. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 5(4), 42.
- Chambers, C. (2005). Masculine domination, radical feminism and change. *Feminist Theory*, 6(3), 325-346.
- Chi, S. (2010). A brief look at the mating values of current Chinese female university students. *Journal of Changchun University of Technology*, 31(4), 51-52. (In Chinese)
- Egri, C. P., & Ralston, D. A. (2004). Generation cohorts and personal values: A comparison of China and the United States. *Organization Science*, 15(2), 210-220.
- Evans, H. (2010). The gender of communication: Changing expectations of mothers and daughters in urban China. *The China Quarterly*, 204, 980-1000.
- Farrer, J. (2002). *Opening up: Youth sex culture and market reform in Shanghai*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Farrer, J. (2011). *Love relationships and courtship conventions among educated Chinese youth*. Paper presented at the Marriage in Cosmopolitan China, The University of Hong Kong.
- Farrer, J. (2014). Love, sex, and commitment: Delinking premarital intimacy from marriage in urban China. In D. Davis & S. Friedman (Eds.), *Wives, husbands, and lovers: Marriage and sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and urban China* (pp. 62-96). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Farrer, J., Suo, G., Tsuchiya, H., & Sun, Z. (2012). Re-embedding sexual meanings: A qualitative comparison of the premarital sexual scripts of Chinese and Japanese young adults. *Sexuality & Culture*, 16(3), 263-286.
- Gabb, J. (2008). *Researching intimacy in families*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gaetano, A. (2014). "Leftover women": Postponing marriage and renegotiating womanhood in urban China. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 2, 124-149.
- Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2011). *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism, and subjectivity*.

London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Hong Fincher, L. (2014). *Leftover women: The resurgence of gender inequality in China*. New York: Zed Books.
- Huang, Z. (2008). *Unmarried women: Research on shengnu's psychology on mate selection* (Master's thesis). Northeastern Normal University, Shanghai. (In Chinese)
- Huppertz, K. (2009). Reworking Bourdieu's 'capital': Feminine and female capitals in the field of paid caring work. *Sociology*, 43(1), 45-66.
- Ji, Y. (2015). Between tradition and modernity: 'Leftover' women in Shanghai. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(5), 1057-1073.
- Kenrick, D. T. (1994). Evolutionary social psychology: From sexual selection to social cognition. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 26 (pp.75-121). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Kenway, J., & McLeod, J. (2004). Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and 'spaces of points of view': Whose reflexivity, which perspective? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), 525-544.
- Liu, F. (2014). From degendering to (re)gendering the self: Chinese youth negotiating modern womanhood. *Gender and Education*, 26(1), 18-34.
- McNay, L. (1999). Gender, habitus and the field: Pierre Bourdieu and the limits of reflexivity. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 16(1), 95-117.
- Pan, S. M. (1993). Sexuality in contemporary China. *Sociological Studies*, 2, 104-110. (In Chinese)
- Parish, W. L., Laumann, E. O., & Mojola, S. A. (2007). Sexual behavior in China: Trends and comparisons. *Population and Development Review*, 33(4), 729-756.
- Qian, M., Wang, Y., Zhang, X., & Song, Z. (2003). Changes of mate selection of Chinese women in the last 15 years. *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 40(5), 121-128. (In Chinese)
- Reynolds, J., Wetherell, M., & Taylor, S. (2007). Choice and chance: Negotiating agency in narratives of singleness. *The Sociological Review*, 55(2), 331-351.
- Sun, P. (2012). *Who's going to marry my daughter: Shanghai matchmaking corners and "white hair matchmaking"*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press. (In Chinese)
- Thorpe, H. (2009). Bourdieu, feminism and female physical culture: Gender reflexivity and the habitus-field complex. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 26, 491-516.
- To, S. (2013). Understanding Sheng Nu (Leftover Women): The phenomenon of late marriage among Chinese professional women. *Symbolic Interaction*, 36(1), 1-20.
- Tsui, M., & Rich, L. (2002). The only child and educational opportunity for girls in urban China. *Gender & Society*, 16(1), 74-92.
- Wang, F., & Yang, Q. (1996). Age at marriage and the first birth interval: The emerg-

- ing change in sexual behavior among young couples in China. *Population and Development Review*, 22(2), 299-320.
- Wu, J. (2012). Post-socialist articulation of gender positions: Contested public sphere of reality dating shows. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *Women and the Media in Asia: The Precarious Self* (pp. 220-236). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Xu, X. (2004). On the epoch characters of mate selecting standard viewed from its Changes—Choice made by Chinese female in the past 50 years since the foundation of New China. *Journal of Wuban University of Technology (Social Science Edition)*, 17(5), 631-635. (In Chinese)
- Xue, Y. (2014, July 26). 60% of the female respondents agreed with the saying that “Chinese men are not good enough for Chinese women”. *Guangzhou Daily*, A16. (In Chinese)
- Yan, Y. (2006). Little emperors or frail pragmatists? China’s ’80ers generation. *Current History*, 105(692), 255-262.
- Yan, Y. X. (2003). *Private life under socialism: Love, intimacy, and family change in a Chinese village 1949-1999*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ye, X. (2010). Cultural invasion and cultural protection: Should Chinese celebrate Christmas. *Asian Social Science*, 6(1), 157.
- Zhang, J., & Sun, P. (2014). When are you going to get married?: Parental matchmaking and middle-class women in contemporary urban China. In D. Davis & S. Friedman (Eds.), *Wives, husbands, and .overs: Marriage and sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Urban China* (pp. 118-144). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Zhang, W. (2013). Class categories and marriage patterns in rural China in the Mao era. *Modern China*, 39(4), 438-471.
- Zheng, J. (2015). *Xiangqin: Matchmaking for Shengnü (Leftover women) in China* (Doctoral thesis, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Hong Kong). Available from The HKU Scholars Hub.
- Zhong, X., Wang, Z., & Di, B. (2001). *Some of us: Chinese women growing up in the Mao era*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Biographical Note: **Zheng Jing** is an Assistant Professor at College of Psychology and Sociology at Shenzhen University in China. She received her PhD from University of Hong Kong. The key questions guiding her research work are how changing intimate relationships are situationally shaped by local social, cultural, and material circumstances in different societies and how public policies affect the well-being of individuals and families. E-mail: zj@szu.edu.cn