

Document 18.12: “Wedding Bells?” by Lu Lin, *Beijing Review*, May 18, 2006

For more Chinese women, marriage becomes a matter of choice, but freedom also poses dilemmas

Lin Qian, a 22-year-old sophomore at a normal university in Beijing, recently has begun thinking of marriage. Snuggling up to her boyfriend, He Tiezhi, 24, who works for an insurance company, Lin said, “Yes, I’d like to marry him. We have been in love for two and a half years, which is quite a long time, so I hope to be together with him forever.”

Asked whether she was afraid that marriage might affect her school work, she responded confidently that being a good wife would not prevent her from being an excellent student.

He Tiezhi...sounded a more cautious note, “ I love her and am economically capable of marrying her now, but I am on the threshold of my career and still have a lot to learn. It’s just not the right time to get married.”

In his view, Lin is a bit inconsiderate in mentioning marriage at this moment. College students marrying while still in school is no longer shocking news, and according to He, a number of Lin’s classmates are cohabiting with their boyfriends, with quite a few preparing for marriage.

“Although I’m still young, I’m full of confidence about our married life and I’m sure we will be able to create a better life by helping each other for the rest of our lives,” Lin said. She added that she had already persuaded her boyfriend to marry her in two years, when she will be in her final year of college.

Several years ago, marriage among undergraduates would seem astounding. There is no lack of examples of students who were expelled from college for marrying, since that violated both school regulations and state laws.

However, in accordance with the revised National Regulations for Students of Colleges and Universities issued on September 1, 2005, as well as China's Marriage Law and Regulations on Marriage Registration, it is unnecessary for undergraduates to get permission from their school if they want to marry, and colleges and universities are forbidden to kick out students who marry.

Change is gradual

For Chinese women, marriage has always been a blend of the bitter and the sweet, but as Chinese society advances, women's attitudes toward marriage are undergoing subtle changes. They are being encouraged to develop their own understanding of marriage and to seek a happy life for themselves.

In ancient times, Chinese women were passive partners in a marriage. Their husbands were selected by their parents. When a girl reached the age of around 16, matchmakers representing a boy's family would visit the girl's family and present a marriage proposal to them. A marriage was always arranged by parents, with the exchange of communications between the two families through the matchmaker, leaving no opportunities for the young couple to see each other before marriage, let alone get to know one another.

The two families had to be similar in economic and social status. The groom's family was required to give presents to the bride's family, and the latter had to provide a dowry to the former. In terms of divorce, husbands were entitled to end the marriage unilaterally while wives were deprived of the right to quit even an unhappy marriage and were not free to marry again if their husbands died.

With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the traditional concept of marriage was criticized as a remnant of feudalism, and the following years have witnessed great changes in women's attitudes toward marriage. They began to struggle for equal rights with men and seek sexual liberation. Nevertheless, for quite a long period, it was

not easy for young women to choose their spouses freely, and friends, relatives and colleagues remained the major channels for meeting a prospective husband.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), love was greatly influenced by political factors, including a person's political standpoint as well as his or her family background (people from such "non-exploiting" classes as workers and farmers were preferred). It was not until 1978, when China began to adopt its reform and opening-up policy, that this situation began to change.

Zhang Guilan, a worker in a state-owned enterprise, married her husband in 1975, after meeting him through senior staff members at work. Prior to their marriage, they had to report to their senior staff on how their relationship was progressing. Zhang said, "At that time, like most girls, I took my marriage as a sacred political task to be fulfilled throughout my life."

Yet, in a sense, little had changed from earlier times. Marriages arranged by parents or by work units both reflected women's rather helpless state, which deeply affected relationships.

Since the late 1970s, however, marriage has gradually been regarded as part of people's privacy and also the reflection of one's own values. With economic and social progress, not only have Chinese women begun to enjoy more freedom to choose their spouses, but their attitudes toward marriage are also quite different from what they used to be.

Not long ago, two multimillionaires' attempts to find brides in universities in southeast China's Guangzhou attracted a large number of female college students. Nowadays, college girls are common visitors to matchmaking agencies, accounting for almost half of the women who seek help there. These girls hope to find "wealthy and successful" husbands who are not necessarily the same age they are. Some are even trying to find husbands while also hunting for a job.

“It’s too difficult for us to find a good job these days, so it’s not a bad idea to marry a wealthy man, who may save us from many years of hard work,” said a senior college student. “If some classmate has a rich and successful boyfriend, she will soon become admired by us all.”

But Fan Fang, a senior translator in a foreign-invested company, holds a viewpoint that also is popular among young professional women. “At the age of 27, I still have quite a lot of things to do. I’m eager for opportunities to study further for my master’s degree or to improve my work capability abroad, so why should I get married so early? There are many available young men around me, but I’m afraid that marriage and family life will block me from doing better in my work. To be frank, I won’t sacrifice too much for marriage, especially when the ideal partner has not come yet.”

Paying a heavy price

According to Zhao Xiao, a post-doctoral researcher at the China Center for Economic Research of Peking University, some white-collar women believe that marriage will cost them a lot, including individual freedom, private time and money.

Zhang Hong is a house sitter in Beijing who faces a dilemma. “After a four-year stay in Beijing, I’ve gotten used to urban life, although I come from the countryside. I’m already 24 years old. In my hometown, almost all the girls at my age have gotten married, but I still don’t know what to do.”

On the one hand, while she feels adjusted to the urban way of life, she also believes no young urban man would want to marry her because she is a rural woman with only a junior middle school education. On the other hand, she views marrying someone from her hometown as a “terrible thing.” But she still expects to meet her true love.

With the progress of society, Chinese women are now free to determine marriage for themselves, a right effectively protected by the law. Shi Ran, a sociologist, believes that

the more liberal attitudes toward marriage are a result of social changes. Girls born in the 1980s have been brought up in a relatively open society, so they have the courage to reject traditional concepts.

Some scholars point out, however, that women's attitudes toward marriage reflect not only their pursuit of personal freedom but also their helplessness in the face of social development. For example, among those college girls who are eager to get married, some argue that as a result of the expansion of college enrollment, college students now face tough competition in employment, and so a great many graduates become insecure about their own abilities. Therefore, some young women choose to depend on a man as a shortcut to a relatively comfortable and stable life.

Professional women hold complicated feelings toward love and marriage. It is economic independence that allows these women to think about what kind of marriage they really want. Fan Fang, for example, said she did not intend to rely on others for a living and expected a marriage based on equality.... And some white-collar women set stiff standards in choosing a future husband. Equipped with higher education degrees, good jobs and relatively high incomes, these women have high expectations of the men they choose as companions for the rest of their lives.

The men's appearance, temperament, personality and economic status are all included in their standards. Some of the women even say they would rather remain single than marry someone who fails to meet their expectations. As a result, marriage gradually becomes a big issue as they grow older.

Education, jobs and social communications all affect women's marriage views, but their improved social status makes it possible for women to make their own choices and deal with the issue on their own terms.

Source: Lu Lin, "Wedding Bells?" *Beijing Review*, May 18, 2006.