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Chinese student migration, gender and family

Book section

Original citation:

Originally published in Kajanus, Anni (2015) *Chinese student migration, gender and family*. Palgrave studies on Chinese education in a global perspective. [Palgrave Macmillan](#), London, UK. ISBN 9781137509093

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Available in LSE Research Online: October 2015

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5. Leftover women

On a Saturday afternoon just before the Spring Festival, Helen sits in a teahouse in one of Beijing's trendy neighbourhoods. Windows of the teahouse are decorated with cardboard cut-out hearts, matching the red of the faux-leather sofas. The sound system plays Chinese and Western love songs and waiters in long aprons carry trays of hot chocolate. The teahouse sets a youthful backdrop for the match-making event organized by Touyuan dating agency. Middle aged men in their tailored slacks and blouson jackets and thirty-something women in jeans and knee-high boots sip on their drinks, waiting for the matchmaker to pair them up. Helen shakes hands with the man guided to her table. Before their 20 minutes are up, the couple have covered their respective education levels, occupations, income and possessions, age, height and family backgrounds. They then have the choice of exchanging contact details or moving on to the next candidate. The upcoming Spring Festival with the customary hometown visit puts extra pressure on many of the singletons taking part in the event, as they dread the urges and questions from worried parents. In Helen's case the parents' worry is somewhat justified. A 31-year-old professional woman with an overseas master's degree, a decent salary and good career prospects, she has several things working against her in the urban Chinese marriage market. In popular discourse she is called *shengnü*, a leftover woman – a woman of three highs (*sangaonü*): high education, high salary, and high professional status, who is well over the ideal marriage age for urban Chinese women and has difficulties finding a suitable husband. As is well known, the family planning policies of the past four decades have resulted in a high sex ratio and the problem of involuntary rural bachelorhood has been addressed by both researchers and worried policy makers (Chao 2005; Edlund et al. 2013; Hudson and den Boer 2004; Ross 2010; Tucker et al. 2005; Tucker et al. 2009; Zhao 2003). How does it then occur that women whose lives are marked by success in all other areas have difficulties finding a husband?

Béarn bachelors and Chinese leftover women

In this analysis of the urban Chinese marriage market and the way the student migrants are part of its transformation, I draw from Bourdieu's (2007) analysis of non-marriage in post-war rural France. To summarise very briefly, Bourdieu discusses the problem of involuntary bachelorhood in his native rural Béarn after the war. The eldest sons, the primary inheritors of the family property, used to be at the top of the marriage market and finding an appropriate match was of primary concern for the continuity of the patrimony. The ideal was to marry a woman who could bring enough dowry to provide for the marriage of the other siblings, but not too much to pose too high a risk in the occurrence of repayment, that is, if the marriage broke down before any children had been born. This logic collapsed in a process that started with economic changes. Because of the post-WW1 inflation, no-one could pay dowries that would match the value of the patrimony. The link between marriage and land was weakened, and it became more a matter of social status and lifestyle. Moreover, as the rural economy became more dependent on the urban economy, and the development of transport and education made the population more integrated, a unification of symbolic markets followed. This was not an egalitarian process, but dominated by urban views and devalued the 'peasant way of life'. Unlike women and younger sons, the eldest sons remained attached to the land and could not take up the new opportunities of education and employment in the urban areas, or adapt the new lifestyles. Parental authority over marriages declined and courtship was left to individual initiative. The eldest sons now had two things working against them. The land had become a burden because women were reluctant to attach themselves to a lifetime of obligations to the parents-in-law and the patrimony. What is more, the eldest sons embodied the devalued 'peasant way of life' in their habitus and bodily hexis, which made it even more difficult to attract a bride.

The book *Bachelors' Ball* (2007) is a republication of three works (originally published in 1962,

1972 and 1989 respectively), drawing together Bourdieu's treatment of the subject from three paradigms, first using structuralist approach, then his theory of practice (habitus), and finally the symbolic market. He identifies the two fundamental oppositions, women vs. men and great houses vs. small houses, at the basis of the values marriage holds up in rural Béarn: male supremacy and primogeniture (protection of the patrimony). He then argues that these are embedded in people's matrimonial strategies through their habitus, and even in the midst of social change, people's manoeuvring follows these underlining principles learned in childhood. Finally, he shows how symbolic change drives the process. Bourdieu argues that the non-marriage of the eldest sons, as detrimental as it was to the 'peasant way of life', upheld the important cultural principles of male supremacy and primogeniture.

The case of the Béarn bachelors shows that in the midst of sociocultural change a part of the population whose position is produced by the old system and who are unable to fit the standards of marriageability in the current system, can be caught in involuntary non-marriage (for another account, see Scheper-Hughes 1979). This is the case for the Chinese bachelors at the bottom end of the marriage market: men from poor rural families, those living in underdeveloped regions and low paid migrant workers in the cities. A long-standing patriarchal belief in the Chinese marriage market is that a man's socioeconomic position should be similar or higher than a woman's. This logic is coupled with the high sex ratio and the recent sociocultural transformations, which include later marriage age and the higher education level of young women and their higher earning power that increase the value of daughters to their natal families. As a result, the power in marriage negotiations has shifted in favour of women and their families (Yan 2003, 2009). Young women in the middle and bottom ranges of the marriage market hierarchy are the main beneficiaries of the intensified practice of spatial and socioeconomic hypergamy. As they 'marry up', the men at the bottom of the hierarchy have difficulty finding a wife.

In the urban areas where sex ratio is smaller, a different problem arises. Having grown up as the

single child of their parents, young women of marrying age have had similar support and opportunities as men. *Patriliny*, one of the central values marriage has upheld in China, has become unsustainable in urban areas after the one child policy, and its main institutions: inheritance, patrilocality and ancestor worship, have largely been discontinued. Marriage has become more about the conjugal couple than the lineage. *Patriarchy*, a general model of male supremacy that encompasses patrilineage and its institutions, as well as the existential, asymmetrical and hierarchical gender model, is the second principal value upheld by marriage, and has also been undermined with the increase of youth autonomy in general, and in spouse selection in particular (Jankowiak 1993; Yan 2003). But here is the paradox, the value of male supremacy is still being upheld, at least at the level of an ideal model. Apart from a few exceptions, all female student migrants I knew hoped to marry a man of a similar or preferably higher socioeconomic status, and many considered a good marriage instrumental not only to their emotional, but also material well-being. As I was explained to: ‘You marry a chicken, you follow the chicken, marry a dog, follow the dog’ (*Jia ji sui ji, jia gou sui gou*). Being so outstanding (*youxiu*) themselves, the ‘leftover women’ want a man of matching ability (*nengli*). This sets high, at times impossible, standards for the men they are willing to marry. For men, on the other hand, the ideal is to marry a woman whose objective qualities are as high as possible in absolute terms, while not too high relative to their own. The current imbalance in the Chinese marriage market bears some resemblance to what Bourdieu describes in post-war rural Béarn. Change in social practices and values challenge the economic and the value base of marriage. But unlike the Béarn bachelors, the Chinese ‘leftover women’, and especially the student migrants, are among the instigators of the unification of the symbolic markets. Their challenge is to negotiate the different symbolic resources, in other words values and ideas, that at times are in conflict with each other and do not fit well with the current demographics. While abiding to new ideas of romance, intimacy, and women’s role in the family and society, the women also aim to act out the hierarchical gender model in their selection of a spouse. The same

variety of symbolic resources that creates this dilemma also comes to the aid of individuals when they try to resolve it. When the Béarn bachelors encountered the changing marriage market, they found no other solution but to stay unmarried. The cultural model for marriage that the bachelors failed to act out was preserved in their non-marriage. The Chinese 'leftover women' can develop more varied strategies, and the student migrants among them draw from their cosmopolitan field, orientation and resources. Before discussing these strategies, let me outline the ideal model for a good marriage match, which is shared by the urban youth to a striking degree.

Good wives, good husbands

Now let's sit back at Helen's table at the dating event. Confidently she lists her requirements for a potential husband: he should have a good family background, at least a master's degree and be tall. He should earn a monthly salary of at least 20,000 CNY and own a house and a car. It is difficult to find a man who meets all of Helen's requirements, but she cannot settle for less because of her own background and status. She herself owns a car and an apartment, and has a monthly salary of 10,000 CNY. Her parents are highly educated, a university professor and an engineer. She wants to find a husband whose background and current situation are better than hers. Being over 30, Helen realises that many men already consider her too old for marriage. To add to the pressure, her parents constantly worry about her situation and urge her to get married soon. After seven years of studying and working in Australia, Helen has recently returned to Beijing. She explains that the need to find a husband was one of the main reasons for her return. Not willing to marry a non-Chinese, she thinks she will have a much better chance of finding a Chinese man of her high standards in Beijing where the level of education and income is generally high, than among the Chinese in Australia. Her search is a time-consuming effort, in the two months that she has been a member of the Touyuan agency, she has taken part in ten such events as today's, has been on several individual

dates, and has communicated with potential matches via email and mobile chat.

I catch a moment with Mr Wang, the busy manager of the Touyuan agency. Showing me the lists of personal information his customers fill up upon joining, and explaining their most common requirements, he confirms the impression I have already got during my fieldwork. The ideas about what makes a good wife and a good husband are strikingly uniform in contemporary urban China. The same list of objective standards recurs in discussions with student migrants, their parents and other urban youth, and in TV shows, pop songs and internet discussion forums. When choosing a spouse, the main considerations are (in random order): family background, occupation, education, income, ownership of a house and a car, age, appearance and personal character. Even though the list is the same for both women and men, the attributes have gendered content and they are differently emphasised by women and men, as well as by the parents. While parents emphasise the importance of similar family background, many young people consider it advantageous but in importance well below the more personal attributes of the potential spouse, such as his or her income and education level. That is, apart from the family's place of origin (rural vs. urban, interior vs. coast, big city vs. medium city), which is considered to greatly influence an *individual's* outlook and habits. Women emphasise income and assets, while men value beauty. Occupation is linked to income, but also to other characteristics desirable in a spouse. Stable jobs, such as positions in teaching or state owned enterprises, were mentioned as good for women because they leave more time and energy to be devoted for the family. For men, challenging jobs in the private business sector with good prospects to increase earnings were thought particularly good.

In this model we can see the traditional rationale for conjugal exchanges, in which material care mainly flows from husband to wife, and reproductive care mainly from wife to husband.

Nevertheless this is not a model determined by some timeless cultural rationale, but clearly shaped by the current emphasis on the individual over family (Kleinman et al. 2011; Rofel 2007; Whyte 2003; Yan 2009). This cultural logic of marriage does not quite work in the current marriage

market, or more precisely, at its top end, the highly educated urban population. When looking at the continuum of the marriage market, we can see that it is the very mobility of women in general that leaves the 'leftover women' unprotected in the marriage market.

Considering the high sex ratio in China and the accounts of women's increasing power in marriage negotiations (Chang 2013; Yan 2009), it may seem surprising that among the educated urban youth, I found a strong sentiment that it is the men who have more choice in the marriage market. While young women often worried about finding a good husband, men of the same age group told me that they had more choice and more time than women, and thus needed not compromise on their demands. Women's demands, in their view, were mere hopes and if they stuck to them for too long, there was a risk that no man would want them.

Bourdieu (2007) argues that the non-marriage of the Béarn bachelors resulted from the disintegration of the protective economic and value mechanisms of the marriage market, exposing it to the anarchy of individual lovers' choice (2007:173). In China, the marriage market was protected by the value principle of patriarchy and the economic principle of patriliney (enacted in living arrangements and inheritance). The family planning policies disrupted this logic. As the ideal of women's hypergamy is still in place, women in areas with high sex ratio simply have more choice and migrate to more desirable locations for marriage. Those left unprotected in this upward circulation of women, are of course the men at the bottom and women at the top of the hierarchy. Apart from this basic rationale, there are some other factors that contribute to the tensions at the urban end of the marriage market.

The main bridewealth in urban China is 'the house', usually meaning an apartment. On the current property market, its acquirement has, however, become almost impossible to many young men and their parents. At the time of my fieldwork, the Bureau of Statistics of the Beijing Municipality reported a 27:1 price-to-income ratio, 5 times the world average (China Building Industry Association and Committee of Commerce and Tourism 2010). The Chinese Academy of Social

Sciences (2009) estimated that 85 per cent of urban residents could not afford to buy a house at the current market. Despite these adverse conditions, all my informants agreed that a newly married couple needed a house, strongly preferring this to living with the in-laws or renting. As the families with daughters do not need to save money for the marriage of sons, many have the ability to share the financial burden of starting a marriage. In these conditions, many young women and their parents still hold the ideal that the groom should provide the house and the car upon marriage, but are aware that in reality it will require some input from both families. The one child policy and the property market bubble in urban China thus contribute to a situation where urban families with sons can expect the bride's family to share the financial burden of marriage. The daughters of urban single-child families are thus not benefiting from the increase of women's power in the marriage negotiations to the same degree as their, in many other respects more disadvantaged, rural counterparts.

Finally, the gender model that informs ideas about appropriate age for marriage, works as a further check against the power of women in the marriage market. The educated urban youth in this study were very consistent in their opinions about the ideal age for themselves and their partner at the time of marriage, namely, mid-20s for women and around 30 for men. The explanations men gave to the preference for younger women were their physical beauty, simple (*jiandan*) minds and lack of status and power (*quanli*) that tend to increase with age. The age bias works in men's favour in the marriage market, as they can find a spouse in their own age cohort or in the next one, but women's best window is limited to their twenties.

The ideal gender model for marriage is difficult to enact in contemporary China, particularly so for the 'leftover women and men'. Now we get to the interesting question of what the 'leftover women', more specifically the student migrants among them, do when they face the disparity between the ideal and the real conditions. First, there are two qualities that can be emphasised to compensate when the partner or the relationship falls short of the ideal. These draw from the two

central aspects of the subjectivity of the urban youth, desire and enterprising. The latter is realised through the quality of *nengli*, which means ability, potential and ambition, a conveniently vague term to be adapted in various circumstances. For example, facing the reality of having to participate in financing the house and the car upon marriage, women and their parents emphasised that a man's *nengli* was more important than his current assets. *Romantic love*, a reflection of the desiring subject that is expressed through affects that centre around the individual (Rofel 2007), also mediates the gap between the ideal model and the reality.

The grown emphasis of both of these qualities is part of the unification of the symbolic markets. This process should not be viewed simply in terms of the adaptation of Western ideas of individuality, sexuality and romance, and rejecting Chinese social norms. Individual desire is very much part of the particularly Chinese subjectivity of the student migrants, and has its origins in the current politico-economic conditions as well as in the collectivist era. The retreated welfare state and the unequally distributed wealth and opportunity that have given rise to the self-interested, enterprising individuals encouraged to express identities through consumption, have accelerated the sociocultural transformations that were already under way before the reforms, such as the 'romantic revolution' (Yan 2003). It is from this background, as well as from the symbolic resources drawn from their cosmopolitan encounters, that the student migrants draw from when contesting and negotiating the Chinese models for gender and romantic and sexual relationships.

Love

In Béarn the unification of symbolic markets was largely a one-directional process of the urban way of life replacing the peasant values. But the idea of romantic love among the student migrants and the urban youth in general shows that what has taken place in China is not a replacement of Chinese values with the Western ones, but a unification that combines ideas and values from different

sources. The idealisation of romantic love has a long history in China, elaborated in the works of art and literature through different dynasties. Songs, stories and popular tales also served as cautionary tales, to warn people about the tension between love, which was considered an individual desire, and social obligation, such as filial duty. A common theme was thus the ability of romantic love to inflict suffering on those involved (Jankowiak 1995). In contemporary China, individual desire is an accepted, or even a required, part of a properly modern and cosmopolitan identity, but at the same time, the tension between that desire and social obligation remains, as can be seen in the negotiations between parents and children about dating and marriage.

The current idea of romance has been influenced by American popular culture, which emphasises public displays of affection in speech and behaviour that are not overtly sexual (Jankowiak 1995). Informants used the word romantic (*langman de*) when referring to these Western forms of behaviour, for example, giving gifts, arranging surprises and talking about love. Other words (often love, *ai*, and care, *guanxin*) were used when talking about more traditional Chinese ways of expressing affection in a romantic relationship, which include paying interest to the small details of each others' daily activities, being concerned over each other's health and well being, and accompanying each other in activities. Many women considered 'foreigners', in this context referring to white Euro-Americans, as the model for romantic behaviour and attitude that Chinese men should learn from.

These two ideas of love and romance are combined in the TV-dramas, films and pop music produced in Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, and in the recent years most notably, South Korea (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008). The young in this study had little interest in Chinese TV, sanctioned by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). Instead, they downloaded and watched shows from the internet, or bought cheap DVDs from street corners. The Korean TV-dramas often show a beautiful, kind-hearted woman of no wealth and status to overcome the obstacles of parental disapproval and class prejudice to be with her true love, an heir of a rich,

notable family, who expresses his love by grand romantic gestures. The traditional East Asian themes of romantic love: suffering, filiality and destiny, are combined with the current cosmopolitan themes of overseas study, premarital sex, cohabitation, homosexuality and so on, in a setting that is utterly desirable, modern and cosmopolitan.

Romance in its overt, dramatic forms was greatly idealised and appreciated by my young informants. Grand gestures were used to express and evoke romantic feelings especially at the early days of a relationship. Jonatan, a good singer and a piano player, arranged a surprise for a woman he had been dating for a while. On the Gregorian New Year's Eve, he took her to a bar that had live music. Jonatan got on stage to serenade to the woman and handed her 33 red roses. The meaning of the number, as he explained, was that as three roses carried the message 'I love you', 33 meant that they would be together forever. Another informant, a 21 year old student, approached the girl he liked by inviting her to a classroom in the evening. He decorated the room with candles and flowers, arranging them to the shape of her name. In front of a group of their friends, whom he had invited to witness the occasion, he asked her to be his girlfriend. Overwhelmed by this romantic gesture, she happily accepted.

Young urban couples are not shy to physically show their affection in public. Couples holding hands, kissing, embracing, sitting on each others' laps, cutting each other's nails, combing hair, correcting make up or clothes and making other similar intimate gestures are a common sight in the public spaces of Beijing. Both students and their parents attributed the increase of public displays of affection to 'learning from the West' during the past decade or two. Chinese students in secondary education are strongly discouraged against dating by their parents and teachers. At this time, nothing should interfere with their focus on study, which is ensured by almost constant supervision by the school and the parents. Of course the more rebellious and the less studious youth find the time and opportunities for dating, but most of the students only start dating after they finish high school. Away from their parents' supervision, with a great deal more unstructured time in their

hands than before, informal socialising and dating becomes an important part of the university experience. Dating relationships are intense and intimate. Couples I knew spent most of their free time together and showed great interest in each others' well-being and everyday activities. There are few private spaces available for students, who live in single-sex dormitories, sharing a room with up to twelve others. Couples loiter at public spaces or go to the hourly paid hotels near university campuses for more privacy. Others rent a room or an apartment together outside campus, usually without the knowledge of their parents who live in a different city. Cohabitation before marriage is disapproved by many parents. The young couples are reluctant to openly act against their parents' wishes, but the fact that many students leave their hometowns to study and to work, only seeing their parents once or twice a year, facilitates non-compliance without direct conflict. The youth autonomy in spouse selection increased rapidly after the 1950s in both rural and urban China (Jankowiak 1993, 1995; Parish and Whyte 1978; Yan 2003). Even though it is extremely rare these days for marriages to take place against the will of the young couple, parental involvement in the process prevails. Several of my informants stressed that it would be very difficult for a couple to stay together without the approval of the parents of both sides. I did not know any couples, dating or married, who were together despite parents' direct opposition. Jonatan's romantic gesture at the bar did not have the outcome he had hoped for. The woman's mother saw Jonatan walk her daughter out while she waited in the car outside the bar that night. The next day the woman called Jonatan, saying that her mother had asked questions about him, and disapproved the relationship. Jonatan worked for his father's business and the mother thought that businessmen were unreliable. She also thought Jonatan was too short for her daughter and they did not look good together. In a tear-filled meeting the couple agreed not to meet anymore. Jonatan often emphasised the stress and anxiety that surrounded dating. The difficulty, in his view, was not to find a woman he liked, but to gain the approval of his and her parents. The importance of parents' opinion was not only due to filial obligation, but his financial dependence on them. Abiding to the ideal model, Jonatan explained the

a man was expected to provide a house and a car upon marriage, but the astronomical sums required for these assets force men to depend on their parents for assistance. If his parents did not like his girlfriend, they simply would not pay for the house, the car and the wedding. Jonatan's mother explained to me that it was the duty of the parents to help their child to make a good choice, a woman who would be good to him and to the whole family. She thus planned to pay close attention to the background and the personality of any woman Jonatan was to introduce.

Delaying the introduction between boyfriend or girlfriend and the parents is a common practice in China. Couples can date for several years before meeting each others' parents. For many, the motivation is that they do not want to involve the parents before an engagement and marriage is planned. For some, however, it is a strategy against parental disapproval. Of the couples I knew, those who had formed relationships against conventions of age and status and expected opposition hoped that the endurance of their relationship would prove its value to the parents. The parents' opinion is important in the process of partner selection, but the youth are not completely without strategies were they to disapprove. From the young people's perspective, an agreement needs to be reached with the parents, but some are more willing than others to test its boundaries, as will be shown below.

Sex

Another field where the unification on symbolic markets is taking place is sex and sexuality (Zhang 2011). In the midst of rapid transition, attitudes and practices range on a wide scale. A 2006 survey covering both rural and urban districts of Shanghai shows a significant change even within a short time span of nine years. The respondents were divided into two age cohorts (16-19 and 20-28), which were then compared in terms of the percentage of females and males who had experienced dating, fondling and coitus before the age of 18. Across the rural and urban, male and female

categories, all these behaviours nearly or more than doubled between the older and the younger cohorts (Zabin et al. 2009). None of my young urban informants disapproved premarital sex, but their attitudes, knowledge on the subject and experiences ranged between two extremes. At one end were the informants who only wanted to have sex with a person they planned to marry. Some of these informants had very little knowledge about the technicalities of sex or contraception. A few used our conversations to ask questions on the topic. They found the subject embarrassing, but felt able to ask questions either because I was older and married, or because I was Western and therefore presumably open (*kaifang*) in my thinking.

At the other extreme were the informants who had curious or unabashed attitudes toward sex. They engaged in sex relationships that did not involve emotional commitment. Kate, a 26 year old returnee had sex relationships with various men, including her ex-boyfriend, a married friend and a middle-aged businessman, while at the same time dating men she would potentially want to marry. Her arrangement with the businessman is an example of a much publicised practice of young women, often students, having sexual relationships with older men, businessmen and government officials, in exchange for material benefits. These arrangements are referred to as being a kept mistress (*baoyang/baoernai*), living off a rich man (*bang dakuan*), and compensated dating (*yuanzhu jiaoji*). They are usually long-term arrangements and the terms are negotiated between the two individuals. In contrast to more direct forms of prostitution that are solicited on the streets, in hair saloons, karaoke bars and restaurants, the compensation is often given through sponsoring an apartment or giving material gifts rather than giving money. Kate had no formal agreement with the man, but upon their mutual understanding, she occasionally accompanied him on business dinners and he visited her in her apartment for sex, and in exchange he bought her designer clothes and other expensive gifts. She saw this relationship as a harmless experience that could offer some excitement and material gain, but would have no significant impact on her future, including her marriage plans. The attitudes and the experiences of most informants fell somewhere in between

these two extremes. They had some knowledge about the subject of sex, discussed it with close friends, and considered sex a natural part of a love relationship, both during dating and marriage. The openness of attitudes toward sex did not follow gender lines, both male and female informants ranged from the conservative to the liberal extremes. Yet ideas about proper sexual behaviour and how it links to the existential characteristics of a woman and man were gendered. Xiao Wei, a 21 year old male student, who had had various sexual partners and had dated a woman who was previously a kept mistress to a businessman, said that he could not consider marriage with her, or a woman with many sexual partners. He believed that he would make a good husband in the future, because his sexual experiences would help him to 'know what he likes' and he would no longer have interest in other women. In contrast, a woman with similar experiences would not make a good wife, because she would no longer be a good woman. Both men and women used the patriarchal discourse to explain that the differential and hierarchical gender roles originated in the Chinese cultural ideology, history and traditions. But while the men cited the cultural traditions to articulate their own views, women used them to explain the expectations the society and men have on women. Even when acting in accordance with these expectations, they did not fully adapt them as their own. Kate hoped to eventually settle down with a wealthy man. Despite her various sexual relationships with men, single and married, her idealisation of marriage included fidelity, but only from her side. She explained her double standard for fidelity in marriage with the patriarchal model.

Because of the dependence. It's just like that. I think it's like that, men are supposed to be strong and hard, women are supposed to be soft. So women can rely on men and men will take care of them. So I think, if women can rely on men, then men can have some privileges. [Laughs surprised] It sounds so strange! When I explain it like this, I think, what a strange idea!

Kate's confused statement shows that she is aware of the patriarchal discourse and cites it

with relative distance, without internalising it in full. Kate is a daughter of two high level cadres, her family is wealthy and well connected. They were able to buy Kate an apartment at the prestigious part of the city, and supported her extravagant lifestyle. Kate herself earned a starting salary of 10.000 CNY at a job she had started only recently. Her wealthy background and good job did not mean Kate would forfeit the ideal of hypergamous marriage. On the contrary, her number one requirement was that the husband should be able to bear the full responsibility of the family finances, offering the lifestyle that Kate was accustomed to and Kate's own assets and earnings would be a mere bonus. In return, she would be a loyal wife and allow her husband 'privileges'. This is what Kandiyoti (Kandiyoti 1997) calls a 'patriarchal bargain', men paying money to buy their wives' loyalty and silence about extramarital affairs, and women trading their positions for financial security.

It is notable that all female informants who had particularly liberal views on sex and sexuality were returned student migrants. This was not the case for male informants. Moreover, most of these women claimed that staying abroad had had a significant impact on their views. They did not link the change to having lived in a sexually more liberal society, but to the experience of increased independence. Surviving on their own abroad had made them more self-assured and less concerned with other people's opinions. This shows that there is more to the transformation of the marriage market than the introduction of new symbolic goods through actual, virtual and imaginary travel. With their individual journeys, the student migrants' positioning in the hierarchies of generation, kinship, gender, etc., shift (Mahler and Pessar 2001), and many experience an increased sense of autonomy from these power systems. In addition, the cosmopolitan orientation and competency (Vertovec and Cohen 2002) they develop, helps them to situationally treat cultures as 'artworks' (Hannerz 1990), view them from the distance (Szerszynski and Urry 2006) and compare them. Finally, several students in this study felt that the spatial and social distance from parents that emerges via migration, gave them an opportunity to live openly as homosexuals. This was a major

motivator to extend one's stay abroad, or to choose a country and a city of study where the family had no previous connections. While many women PhD students worried about not being able to find a suitable husband, for some gay women embarking on a doctorate study had the advantage of not having to deal with the parental pressure to marry for a few more years. None of the gay informants in this study had openly discussed their sexuality with their parents, and none of them expected their parents to approve of a same-sex relationship. While not a permanent solution, spatial mobility temporally enabled non-compliance without direct conflict.

The cosmopolitan orientation and competencies, the geography of power, the emphasis on romantic love and *nengli*, and the new symbolic resources adapted from abroad, are all part of the experiences of the student migrants as they negotiate their difficult position in the marriage market. Their courses of action can be categorised as compromises, non-compliance and engaging in the marriage markets of other countries.

Compromises

Compromising on either romantic love or on the objective standards was the most common strategy of the student migrants I knew who were not able to find a spouse to match their ideal. Kate and Nelly both had Chinese boyfriends while studying abroad, but broke up with them upon returning to China. Kate met her boyfriend in Holland where the two studied and lived together for three years. After earning their bachelor's degrees, they took different directions, Kate going to UK to study for a master's degree, and her boyfriend enrolling in a university in Amsterdam. As Kate returned to Beijing to work, her boyfriend found a job at a multinational IT company in Amsterdam. On Kate's account, the two never officially ended their relationship, but in addition to her sex relationships with various men, she also dated men with the objective of finding a husband. When I first got to know Kate, she viewed the prospect of marrying her university boyfriend with disdain. She claimed

that their relationship lacked passion and feeling, and hoped to passionately fall in love with a man who would also meet her objective requirements of wealth and success. Kate's university boyfriend, on the other hand, seemed more interested in maintaining the relationship and directing it towards marriage. He came to visit Kate in Beijing, but she went out with friends, only returning to her apartment in the morning after he had left for the airport. He suggested that he would arrange a transfer to the company's Shanghai office, and asked Kate to move there with him. Kate refused on the excuse that she liked Beijing more and all her friends lived there. She told me that the real reason was that she liked her 'single life' in Beijing, and did not want to marry him. Despite avoiding intimacy and finding excuses against his attempts to move the relationship forward, Kate did not completely end the relationship. Fulfilling all of Kate's objective criteria for a good husband, he was her backup plan, in case she failed to find a man of similar attributes but also mutual attraction. A few years later, after various relationships of both sexual and romantic nature, which had left her disillusioned with love and romance as a basis of relationships, Kate was starting to seriously consider marriage with her university boyfriend. 'I am a materialistic and practical person', she explained, 'I like to enjoy life, so I pursue a stable and secure lifestyle.'

Nelly made a different choice. She had met her boyfriend while an undergraduate in China. When Nelly went abroad for two years to study for a masters' degree, the couple stayed together with the plan to marry upon her return. The parents of the couple met for negotiations, and the boyfriends' family bought an apartment and a car in preparation for the marriage. But the time abroad had a profound impact on Nelly, and when she returned, she wanted to cancel the marriage plans. Unlike Kate, who had sought comfort and security from a relationship while studying abroad, citing that as her main motivation to stay with her boyfriend, Nelly grew more independent, outgoing and open-minded. While abroad, Kate mainly socialised with other Chinese students, spent most of her time with her boyfriend and relied on him in taking care of practicalities. Nelly, in contrast, actively engaged with the surrounding student community and the local society by making friends, attending

parties, adapting new ideas, style of dress, and ways of interacting with people. But upon returning to China, it was Kate whose quest to find a new relationship was motivated by the desire for symbolic goods associated with the West: romantic and sexual passion. Nelly's separation from her boyfriend was motivated by the Chinese cultural logic of a good match. Having increased her *nengli* through self-development, she felt, in line with the hierarchical gender model, that her boyfriend's attributes no longer matched, let alone surpassed, hers. Against the wishes of her boyfriend and the parents of both of them, Nelly ended the relationship.

During the following three years, Nelly dated several men and often agonised over the difficulty of finding a decent man with whom she 'had feeling' with. She then started to like a man, a friend's friend, who did not match half of her requirements. Having quit his career in business to take care of his parents, he owned a small shop for selling his own artwork. 'The feeling together is very good, but he has no money! That's the only problem!' Nelly lamented upon meeting him. After some time of dating, Nelly concluded that the man's *nengli* was high and he had simply become a victim of unfortunate circumstances of his parents' illness. After a year together, the two got married without any marriage transactions taking place, with the reluctant approval of Nelly's parents. They moved to a rented flat in the outskirts of Beijing. As the husband's mother passed away and his father's health improved, he was able to devote more time to develop his skills as a carver, and his shop and online store started running better. Nelly took a job as a manager for an IT outsourcing company, which she could partly do from home office. In Nelly's words, she has grown more mature and is willing to work together with her husband to build a good life, as long as the feeling between them is good.

Kate and Nelly's experiences show the complexity of the ways cosmopolitan subjectivity is enacted. The lifestyles and the degree of integration while abroad does not predict the way students live and make decisions once they return to China. Both Nelly and Kate claimed that the experience of studying abroad had influenced their values and personalities. Nelly linked her process of self-

development directly to adapting new ideas and ways of behaving while abroad. Her marriage appears to match the Western ideal of a 'pure relationship' (Giddens 1992) better than Kate's planned marriage to her university boyfriend. But Nelly articulated her decision to break off her first engagement in terms of the Chinese logic of a good match. She also drew from it when rationalising the new relationship, deciding that the man's *nengli* and the love between them were enough to compensate for his shortcomings on the objective criteria.

The migration experience attached Kate *more strongly* to the Chinese sociocultural field, as she came to realise that she was most comfortable working, dating and socialising in a culturally, socially and linguistically Chinese environment. But her attachment was now a choice, and the way she reattached herself was influenced by her cosmopolitan experience. She contrasted her party lifestyle with the boring life in Europe. Getting drunk at the clubs, having sex relations without emotional attachment and in exchange for material compensation, and dating married men went against social norms in China. Kate nevertheless viewed them as specifically Chinese ways of acting. She therefore did not account these behaviours to 'learning from the West', but on the contrary, explained them with the practical nature of the Chinese society, and herself being a Chinese person. What she did account to her cosmopolitan experience, however, was her courage to engage in such behaviours. Student migrants thus not only introduce new symbolic goods to the Chinese sociocultural field, but also engage in already existing modes of behaviour, which they would have avoided before their migrant experience. Bruce Robbins (1998) has noted that cosmopolitanism is not a mode of detachment, but of attachment and reattachment, multiple attachment, and attachment at a distance (Robbins 1998:3). As the student migrants attach to the Chinese sociocultural field, their cosmopolitan existence becomes part of it.

Non-compliance

Some returnees question the cultural models for gender and marriage altogether and have relationships that are in a clear conflict with them. Nelly's best friend, Sarah, was one of them. While Nelly dated men with the objective of finding a husband, Sarah was not interested in marriage. When I first met Sarah, I asked if she had a boyfriend. 'No', she laughed, 'I don't have boyfriends, I have lovers.' Similarly to Kate, Sarah maintained several sex relationships at the same time, one of them with an Austrian man she met regularly when travelling to Europe for business. Unlike Kate, Sarah did not see this as a passing stage of experimenting before finding a culturally sanctioned match for marriage.

The only time she seriously considered marriage was when one of her sex partners of several years proposed to her. The two had grown emotionally attached, and the man wanted to either get married or to end the relationship. A hairdresser eight years her junior, his status was below Sarah's by all standards from age to education, occupation, income and family background. These ill-matched characteristics prompted Sarah's friends to advice against the marriage. Sarah also knew that she would have her work carved out in trying to gain her parents' approval. After pondering the situation for months, she finally decided against the marriage. In our discussions during this time, Sarah's main concern seemed not to be the differences in qualifications and income. She emphasised his *nengli*, and said that despite the differences, they had similar views and personalities. Sarah felt that socioeconomic mobility through marriage was the strategy of women who came from disadvantaged backgrounds, or did not have *nengli*. Her own success rendered her free to choose a spouse by other than material considerations. By this, Sarah clearly rejected the cultural model of gender hierarchy. But she showed her awareness of it in her considerations of the age difference. Sarah worried that even though the age difference did not seem a problem now, it would become such in the years to come. 'When I'm 40, he'll be 32. I'll be old and he'll still be

attractive. Many girls will flirt with him, and I will have to worry about it. I don't want that.' Even though Sarah rejected the gender model that values men's higher status and women's youth and beauty, it was part of her subjectivity, influencing her motivations and anxieties in the decision making. After her decision, Sarah did not start to search for a better matching candidate for marriage. At the age of 34, she is still unmarried.

The couples I knew whose relationships strongly conflicted the cultural gender model, experienced immense pressure from their friends and families. Many gave in eventually, ending the relationship. The practice of delaying the introduction between the parents and the dating partner for several years allows the youth to push the boundaries of cultural norms. But crossing them by marriage is another matter, and for most these relationships remain experiences of the youth, before a more 'mature' choice is made for marriage. The physical distance created by migration somewhat changes this dynamic. As the students' immediate living environment is controlled by different social norms, they feel less pressure to follow the Chinese conventions. Even after returning to China, the cosmopolitan orientation allows some student migrants to maintain some distance to the local power systems.

Dating and marrying non-Chinese

Marrying a non-Chinese is one of the cosmopolitan strategies of the 'leftover women'. Social mobility through marriage across national borders has its roots in the traditional practice of women's spatial hypergamy in China. In patrilocal societies, where the bride has to adapt to the new living conditions after marriage, it is logical to aspire to marry to a location that is similar or more desirable than the natal place (Oxfeld 2005:19). In the reform years, the distances travelled for marriage have grown and brides increasingly cross provincial and national borders. 'Marriage scapes' that link fantasies of gender, race, sexuality and modernity with certain sites, have formed

(Constable 2005b). For the student migrants, the most desirable destinations for study are also the most desirable sources of non-Chinese marriage partners. Women's wish to marry a foreigner is linked to both, the project of finding a husband of higher status by objective standards, and to the cosmopolitan desires that equate foreign men with romance, freedom, independence, progress and modernity.

The nationality and race of foreigners at times overrides other objective standards in the marriage market hierarchy. Economic wealth, global political power, cultural heritage, natural environment, civil society, social welfare and crime rate are among the indicators of development that are used to rank countries. For example, while US is considered to be at the top in terms of global economic and political influence, some European countries are valued for relatively clean environment, safe cities or rich cultural heritage. Apart from nationality, race is a marker of status. The Chinese discourse of race, in both its scientific and folk forms, is based on the lineage model and a racial hierarchy where the 'white and yellow races' are placed above the 'brown, black and red races', in competition with each other (Dikötter 1997). A citizenship of a developed country and a 'white' racial status can sometimes compensate for the other objective criteria when a Chinese woman marries a man whose status in his home country does not match her high status in China. It must be noted that the value of these assets seems to be in decline with the expansion of China's global economic and political power, and the increased prevalence of cosmopolitan encounters of its young urbanites. Foreign men are increasingly assessed by the same standards as the Chinese men. Many of the young, highly educated women who had plans or experience of living abroad told me that they were not interested in dating the foreigners in China, who were mostly young drifters, language teachers with no proper careers, or old divorced men looking for young beautiful wives, all of low social and economic status in their home countries. This shows that the unification of the symbolic markets is a constant process, and the value attached to symbolic goods (here nationality and race) continues to evolve as they become more integrated into the local symbolic market, and

moreover, as the unification of *economic* markets develops.

Marrying white Euro-Americans has been a practice of Chinese women rather than men (Constable 2005b). One explanation is the racial discourse in the West that feminises Asian men, rendering them undesirable partners (Mahler and Pessar 2006:38). Another perspective is given by Bourdieu (2007), who argues that objective attachment to a place creates subjective attachment to its culture (habits, lifestyles, fashion, etc.). In the case of China, there is no doubt that the patrilineal institutions have attached men more strongly than women to their home places. But does this hold for the student migrants, the sons and daughters of the urban single-child families? In the light of my research, much of the importance of the patrilineal institutions has waned. But at the same time, patrilineality and its complement patriarchy remain powerful discourses, and I found that male student migrants used them alongside the racial discourse to rationalise why they themselves or Chinese men in general did not want to marry foreigners. Chinese women were described as more adaptable to new customs and skilful in languages and thus able to have successful cross-cultural marriages. On the flip side, men often told me that because of the higher status of men in Chinese society, the women had less to lose if they married a foreigner. If a man married a woman of high racial, national and economic status, he would feel great pressure to retain an appropriately high status to ensure a well balanced marriage. A woman, on the other hand, did not have to compete with her non-Chinese husband, but could climb up on the socioeconomic ladder through marriage. Men preferred to use this discourse rather than the racial one, which they were also aware of. Even though very few used the racial discourse as a primary explanation of why they did not want to marry foreigners, some commented that finding a foreign girlfriend would be difficult, that they would not dare to approach foreign women, or that dating a foreign woman would 'give face'. Bourdieu gives another conceptual tool that helps to understand why the cross-cultural marriage still remains mainly a women's strategy. He argues that the force of attraction the new sociocultural field exerts and the force of inertia of different agents against it varies according to their attachment

to the old field (2007:171–3). There are at least two factors that can increase the force of attraction the cross-border marriages and permanent settlement abroad have on female student migrants more than on the male student migrants. These are the Chinese job market and the marriage market. The gendered job market not only pushes women toward certain, less prestigious occupations, but also limits their upward mobility (Brooded and Liu 1996; Li and Zhang 2010; Wang and Cai 2008; Xiang and Shen 2009). The logic of the marriage market, in which women circulate upwards, drives the women at the top to extend their field across national borders, importantly, to countries higher up in the geography of desire.

As I have noted, male student migrants tended to articulate their choices, pressures, and concerns in terms of filial obligations more than the female student migrants. The question of the continuity of their stronger attachment to the old field through the patrilineal institutions and ideals is thus difficult, and in need of more research. Indicative of this complexity, or even change, are my survey results. The surveys included a set of questions about the students' attitudes towards dating and marrying foreigners. To my great surprise, in both surveys (the Renmin sample of the aspiring student migrants, and the current student migrants at the LSE) men showed more positive attitudes than women. In all categories (dating a foreigner, marrying a foreigner, dating an ethnically Chinese foreigner, marrying an ethnically Chinese foreigner), a larger percentage of men than women responded 'willing' or 'very willing'. Even though their practices do not currently match the attitudes, these results contest the image of the unadaptable Chinese man who is concerned with the racial purity of the lineage and resistant to cultural adaptation.

One thing these results suggest is that men feel that factors that are not controlled by themselves render cross-cultural relationships difficult. The racial discourse is of course one of them, and even though seldom used by men when talking about dating and marriage, discrimination in general was one of the central concerns for male student migrants. For example, some men gave their disadvantaged position in racial hierarchies as a major reason to return to China after graduation.

Female student migrants, in contrast, did not show much concern over discrimination. Men's higher gender and kinship status in China results in a greater decline of status through migration, than what women experience. To the men, their positioning in the Chinese gender and kinship hierarchies was significant to their experience of status abroad. In contrast, women primarily articulated their status abroad in terms of their positioning in the local hierarchies of gender and race. In this context, the hypersexualisation of the Asian women, or in the words of my informants, 'the popularity of Chinese women in the West', was interpreted positively.

Nevertheless, the results also suggest an ongoing change. As the cosmopolitan encounters of the young Chinese men become more prevalent, the significance of the idea of the asexualised Chinese man in the West (Mahler and Pessar 2006:38) decreases as its place is taken by other competing discourses, ideas and personal experiences. In fact, this racial discourse was rejected by those male informants who *had* dated foreign women. These men were still an exception among the student migrants, often those whose parents had sent them abroad at a young age for secondary education. Wang was one of them. Having dated several foreign women both in China and in the US, he claimed that the reason why romantic and sexual relationships between Chinese student migrant men and White Euro-American women were still relatively rare, was not the prejudice of the women, but the misconceptions and the lack of confidence of the Chinese men.

Conclusion

The conflict in the Chinese marriage market results from the tension between cultural ideas of gender and the new social practices. The high sex ratio, changed family composition, increased investment in daughters' education and economic inequality all contribute to the situation where large numbers of men and women have difficulties finding a spouse. Being high achieving women with exposure to a variety of cultural ideas about sexual and romantic relations, marriage is not a

simple matter for the female student migrants. Their gendered positioning in the marriage market renders the men who meet their objective standards relatively few. Complicating the matter is their desire for a relationship with romantic and sexual intimacy. They are free to go about the search for a husband on their own, but know that the approval of the parents needs to be gained eventually. The complexity of this dynamic justifies the question of how anyone actually manages to marry. But unlike the Béarn bachelors, the Chinese student migrants *do* get married. This suggests two things. First, these women have more room to manoeuvre and more varied strategies at their disposal than the Béarn bachelors. They draw from the enterprising and the desiring part of their subjectivities to emphasise *nengli* and romantic love to compensate the falling short of the ideal model for marriage. They can also engage in the dating and marriage markets of their destination countries. Second, the ultimate principles of primogeniture and male supremacy were preserved in the non-marriage of the Béarn bachelors. When the Chinese ‘leftover women’ *do* marry, they challenge the values held up in the cultural model for marriage. The challenge on patriliney and patriarchy is of course not new in China, but the student migrants are part of this transformation through their individual journeys. They draw new ideas and practices from their cosmopolitan encounters thus contributing to the unification of the symbolic markets. Their cosmopolitan orientation gives them reflexivity over different values and models that are part of their subjectivities. Finally, their mobility across spatial and sociocultural fields shifts their positioning in the geography of power, at times in ways that gives them a sense of relative autonomy from different systems of power.

The Chinese marriage market is part of the student migrant subjectivity, as the cultural models for gender and romantic and sexual relationships are enacted in affective relationships. At the same time the cosmopolitan subjectivity of the student migrants becomes part of the Chinese marriage market and its transformation. I have shown how the cosmopolitan skills, orientation and politics work in particular settings of education and marriage markets. In the next chapter, I aim to explore

how the different aspects of cosmopolitanism are manifested in the lives of individual student migrants as a whole.