



Paul Johnson tries every job in Shanghai. This month: helping people fall in love

Gon Laoshi has been working as a matchmaker for eight years, and in that time she's helped arrange hundreds of marriages – including her own. Three years ago her future husband walked into her office and not only found a wife, but also found a job in her company. She tells the story with a beatific smile. 'That's why I do this job.'

Finding love can be hard, but finding love for a complete stranger – that's easier, and kind of fun. At the Shanghai Marriage Market in People's Park, matchmaker Zhou Laoshi and I sit behind two umbrellas resting on their sides, serving as makeshift tables to display profiles of our clients. Hundreds of greying parents – some carrying posters advertising their child's vital statistics – shuffle through the rows of matchmakers, reading profiles displayed on umbrellas, rolling suitcases, or hanging on long strings.

These profiles say nothing about 'enjoying long, romantic walks on the beach', instead reading like the statistics on the back of a baseball card. Gender: male; Born: 77; Height: 175cm; Degree: bachelors; Job: administrator; Earns: 260,000RMB; Property: owns a car and an apartment. In America, earnings and property ownership are fourth or fifth or sixth date questions. I still don't know how much my wife earns. I should get my parents to ask.

Zhou asks me to hold a sign displaying copies of Shanghai Hongyan Matchmaking's business licenses. In August the government shut down many unlicensed matchmakers after receiving complaints that some profiles were fake or CVs hadn't been properly vetted. Matchmakers not only serve to connect, but also to verify background details like degrees and income. Asking a third party to verify information is well worth the investment since I've lost count of how many candlelit dinners were ruined when I asked to see some ID.

Holding a sign seems like a job an umbrella could do, but an umbrella lacks my natural charisma and I attract a steady stream of parents. Zhou nods her approval as I begin taking contact information and arranging follow-up meetings at a nearby office. She's too absorbed speaking with other prospective clients to realise most of the parents are approaching me as a potential husband.

A stooped, senior woman pushes a photo of a smiling young woman into my hands, and tells me her daughter would be interested

in a foreigner husband. One parent after another tells me the same story of a child being too busy to meet anyone. Although parents dominate the marriage market (many come without their child's consent), one matchmaker tells me parents initiate her services only half of the time.

After I tell the woman I'm already married, she implores me to pass her daughter's information along if I have any foreigner friends who might be interested. She hands me

a slip with a phone number and statistics: Shanghaiese; born in 1983; 7,000RMB in savings; works for a Japanese company. I shake my head and tell the woman, '7,000RMB is

not nearly enough money to be worth leaving my wife.' If my wife is reading this, I didn't really say that.

Throughout the day I read hundreds of profile papers, posters, cards and banners. Some matchmakers charge as little as 10RMB a month to display your kid's information. The highest percentage of prospective spouses were born in the early '80s and the '70s. I find a few born in the early '90s, and this seems

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young to have abandoned hope of finding someone on your own. I see many born in the '60s and '50s, and even some in the '40s. The oldest profile I find is a woman born in 1933. Is she widowed? Divorced? Never married? I would love to know her story.

First impressions are important, and as I watch parents aggressively haggle with other parents, I like to think I'm witnessing the first meeting between future in-laws. Under those circumstances a Westerner might be inclined to strike a conciliatory, compromising tone, but in China, haggling is the national pastime, and you wouldn't want a grandchild to descend from weak hagglers.

Zhou and I take contact information throughout the day and arrange follow-up meetings for the coming week at one of Shanghai Hongyan Matchmaking's three offices staffed by 44 employees managing a portfolio of 6-7,000 prospective spouses. At the office, Gon Laoshi shows me how she groups clients into different folders based on ages and requirements. When Gon asks a client what she or he is seeking in a potential partner, she confirms the stereotype that men usually ask for someone pretty, and women ask for someone with money.

Her clientele is 55 percent women and two out of three are Shanghaiese. Shanghaiese generally only want to marry other Shanghaiese, but she can find someone for anyone if that person is willing to look further afield. It's possible a match may take weeks or months, but she could find someone in days, and has even made a match in less than one.

I ask what makes a good matchmaker, and I assume the answer will have something to do with looking good in formal wear since she receives dozens of wedding invitations a year. She tells me a good matchmaker needs to communicate well with people, should stick to the customer requirements, and should be willing to give an opinion when a match is not a good option. She thinks for a moment before adding, 'You have to use your heart.'

For more details on **Shanghai Hongyan Matchmaking**, visit www.5000love.com.

