



Serious Business

Love and Online Dating in China

Manya Koetse

Die große Liebe online finden? Das ist in China nicht unüblich – so hat die Dating-Website *Baihe* etwa 85 Millionen Mitglieder – und Geschäftsleute freuen sich über die Gewinne. Der gesellschaftliche und familiäre Druck der ab 25 auf Frauen lastet, die noch nicht verheiratet sind, ist enorm. Das Internet bietet diesen „Übriggebliebenen“ etwa die Möglichkeit, den Fragen der Familie zu entgehen, indem sie einen Mann, der sie als „Verlobter“ zur Familienfeier begleitet, im Internet mieten können. Darüber und welche anderen Möglichkeiten das Online-Daten in China bietet, berichtet Manya Koetse.

China's economic growth has brought about drastic societal changes in the last decennia. It has not just changed entire villages and family constructions; it has also reshaped the landscape of dating and marriage. Millions of Chinese women go online every day in hopes of finding their Mr. Perfect. In China, online dating is serious business for many.

In a country of 1.3 billion finding a suitable spouse is not always easy. China's Internet is flourishing, and for many investors, the online dating market is a goldmine. In the past few years, dating websites like *Baihe* or *Jiayuan* have acquired millions of subscribers, the first claiming to have a membership of 85 million, the latter approximately 100 million registered users. Even more successful than dating websites are China's dating apps. With the world's largest smartphone market, the majority of Chinese Internet users go online through their mobile phone. I-Phone and Android dating apps

such as *Momo* or *Tantan* (comparable to *Tinder*) have become increasingly popular. Amongst other functions, they allow users to explore potential love interests based on one's location. This makes it possible for members to look for a partner who lives in the same neighbourhood, or goes to the same karaoke bar. These apps that generate revenue through paid membership or advertising are not only serious business for their creators. Innocent flirting aside, many users are seriously looking to get settled – especially for women the pressure to get married is very real.

Why are you not married yet?

This is a question many single women get to hear on a regular basis. Especially during family gatherings, such as Chinese New Year, single ladies recurrently have to listen to their parent's plea to find a boyfriend and get married. Women who are still single at the age of 27 are often labelled as 'leftover women', a somewhat derogatory term that has been hyped in the

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» » years. It refers to twenty-something, single, well-educated urban women who have difficulties in finding a partner that can live up to their expectations. Their parents' pleas are not in vain: after the Chinese New Year there is a 40% increase in blind dates. These meetings are generally arranged by the parents themselves, who attend public matchmaking events where they search for suitable partners for their single sons or daughters. Some public parks, such as the Shanghai People's Park, even have a 'blind dating corner', where parents walk around with a picture of their child and a handwritten paper with what requirements a potential partner should meet. Not all daughters give in to the pressure to get married. This year a group of young women boldly protested in Shanghai, holding signs saying: "Mum, do not force me to get married, I'm in charge of my own happiness". Others are less confrontational: they rent a boyfriend to join them on family occasions. This way their parents can stop worrying, and they will not have to go through the process of being asked nagging questions. These male 'escorts' can be arranged through Taobao, China's biggest e-commerce platform. Well-educated young men with good looks charge high fees to play the ideal boyfriend for a day.

Why is it so hard for 'leftover women' to find a partner?

Ironically China has more single men than women. Since the implementation of the one-child policy in 1978 China has been dealing with a disparity in girls and boys due to traditional preferences for sons and the widespread occurrence of illegal sex-selective abortions. In 2004, 121.2 boys were born for every 100 girls. This gender ratio imbalance has drastic consequences for Chinese society. It is expected that around 30 million men of marrying age will not be able to find a bride in 2020. Currently there are around 20 million more men under the age of thirty than women in the same age category. Statistically this would suggest

that women have no problem in finding a partner. But, problematically, the majority of China's 'leftover women' live in urban areas and are at the 'high end' of the societal ladder (relatively high income and education), whereas the majority of the so-called 'leftover men' are based in rural areas and are at the 'lower end' (lower income and education). Since Chinese women traditionally prefer to marry 'up' in terms of age, income and education, and the men usually marry 'down', these men and women find themselves at the wrong ends of the ladder. Although China has more single men it is the "leftover" women who are stigmatized in the media and suffer more familial and societal pressure to get married than their male counterpart. This can partly be explained by traditional ideas about women's ideal age to get married. According to the Chinese Association of Marriages and Relationships, the best age for women to get married is 25 in a man's perspective. A survey by dating site *Zhenai* revealed that 50% of men already think a woman is 'leftover' when she is still single at that age.

While the age factor plays an important role from a men's perspective, Chinese single women generally attach importance to the economic situation of one's partner. Owning a car and a house are often mentioned as requirements. Dating and marriage thus involve much more than love alone: China's marriage market dynamics seem to be based more on strategy than romance.

The online dating market

China's online dating market offers a myriad of possibilities for women to look for a partner. They can search for their Mr. Perfect based on location, age, looks, education and financial standing. Popular dating websites like *Baihe* meet their customer's demand by approaching dating in a practical way. Members have to provide their real names, and are encouraged to add information about their educational background and economic situation.

They even offer the option for third-party agencies to confirm their financial condition. This makes it easier for Chinese women to control their partner search according to their requirements. *Baihe* recently celebrated its tenth anniversary with a mass wedding of thirty couples. Throughout the years *Baihe* has brought together thousands of people. According to CEO Tian Fanjiang the dating platform will keep on growing together with its member base, offering wedding services, marriage counselling and trainings in the future. Unfortunately, online dating is not all moonlight and roses. *Momo*, one of China's most popular dating apps, has become known as a 'one-night stand' app, used to look for casual sex rather than long-term commitment. There are also companies taking advantage of the fact that so many single men and women are desperate to find a partner. In May 2015, China's Internet watchdog closed 128 online dating sites for their fraudulent business and prostitution practices. Although online dating offers many possibilities, it also comes with risks, turning love-wanting netizens into easy victims. China's large online dating environment brings love and technology together. Although it will not solve the problems of China's 'leftover' women and men, it does contribute to their romantic liberation and widens the possibilities of finding love. Best of all: their parents no longer need to frequent the 'blind date corner' in their local park.

On the author: Manya Koetse is sinologist and editor of "What's on Weibo", a website providing cultural, historical and political insights into trending topics on China's biggest social media sites, such as Sina Weibo (www.whatsonweibo.com). She lives in Beijing, China.

