

Mate Selection in China

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Mate Selection in China: Causes and Consequences in the Search for a Spouse

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Contents

List of Figures	<i>vii</i>
List of Tables	<i>ix</i>
About the Authors	<i>xi</i>
Foreword	<i>xiii</i>
Chapter 1 History of Family Dynamics and Mate Selection in China	<i>1</i>
Chapter 2 Economic, Political, and Social Change in China	<i>23</i>
Chapter 3 The One-Child Policy and Demographic Transitions	<i>41</i>
Chapter 4 Contemporary Dating and Mate Selection: Parents, Peers, and Sexual Intimacy	<i>61</i>
Chapter 5 Cohabitation and Divorce	<i>83</i>
Chapter 6 Fertility and Mate Selection	<i>103</i>
Chapter 7 Shengnü – The “Leftover Women”	<i>121</i>
Chapter 8 “Bare Branches”: Involuntary Bachelorhood in China in the 21st Century	<i>135</i>
Chapter 9 Aging Parents and Familial Support	<i>149</i>
Chapter 10 Criminal Consequences: Prostitution and Human Trafficking	<i>165</i>

Chapter 11 The Future of Mate Selection	<i>183</i>
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Index	<i>195</i>
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List of Figures

Fig. 3.1.	Sex Ratio at Birth in China, 1950–2015	56
Fig. 3.2.	Total Fertility Rate in China, 1950–2020	56
Fig. 5.1.	Crude Divorce Rate (Per 1,000 Population), 1990–2019	95
Fig. 7.1.	Mean Age at First Marriage by Gender in China, 1945–2010	124
Fig. 8.1.	Mechanisms of Male Marriage Squeeze	137
Fig. 8.2.	Projected effects of graduate interactions in the SRB, fertility, and age gap on the percentage of single men aged 25–39.	146
Fig. 9.1.	Proportion of children, adults, and seniors in the population, by year.	150
Fig. 9.2.	Dependency ratios for children and seniors, by year.	151

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List of Tables

Table 3.1.	China's Population over Time	44
Table 3.2.	Sex Ratio by Province in 1986	51
Table 3.3.	Contraceptive Use among Married Women, Ages 15–49	53
Table 4.1.	Mean Levels of Dating and Marriage Desires among Young Chinese Adults, by Sex	64
Table 4.2.	Mean Levels of Dating Attitudes and Experience among Young Chinese Adults, by Sex	66
Table 4.3.	Mean Levels of Desired Partner Characteristics among Young Chinese Adults, by Sex	68
Table 4.4.	Mean Levels of Peer and Parental Influences among Young Chinese Adults, by Sex	72
Table 4.5.	Mean Levels of Sexual Intimacy Initiation among Young Chinese Adults, by Sex	77
Table 5.1.	Mean Levels of Perceptions of Cohabitation among Young Chinese Adults, by Sex	87
Table 5.2.	Mean Levels of Mate Selection Preferences among Young Chinese Adults, by Willingness to Cohabit and Sex	88
Table 6.1.	Mean Levels of Pro-natalist Attitudes and Birth Intentions Among Young Chinese Adults, by Sex	110
Table 6.2.	Mean Levels of Marriage and Birth Intentions Among Young Chinese Women, by Year	113
Table 6.3.	Mean Levels of Marriage and Birth Intentions Among Young Chinese Men, by Year	114
Table 8.1.	The Size of Unmarried Men and Women Aged Older than 30 Years between 1982 and 2010	139
Table 8.2.	Proportions of Never Married and Corresponding Sex Ratios (Men Per 100 Women) by Residence, 2010	140
Table 8.3.	Proportion (%) of Never-married Men by Age Group and Educational Attainment in 2010	141

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Foreword

This project began from the observations that the three of us had made while spending time in China. The past several decades have been witnessed to dramatic transformations within the nation, as its pace of modernization has continued to accelerate. A casual stroll through Shanghai, with its futuristic skyline of Pudong, allowed us to see young couples, walking together, taking selfies, and doing most of the things which young people in love do. However, we noticed that only a scant few of the couples would hold hands in public, and even fewer dared to perform the scandalous act of kissing in public (gasp!). The peculiarity of intimate relationships, through our Western eyes, was fascinating and prompted us to delve deeper into the subject. Subsequent visits to rural areas in central and western China revealed a dramatically different approach to intimate relationships, as young people there typically deferred to the wishes of their parents, who could both initiate and stop such relationships with a simple directive to their daughters and sons. Indeed, in many areas of the country, the norms and practices concerning intimate relationships among young people were more reflective of the traditions dating back thousands of years. Finding a partner in contemporary China, then, represents a challenge to many young women and men, as they live in a society that is not only modernizing and evolving but also built upon a long-standing culture whose traditions are still held sacred by many in the larger society.

As is typically the case, the younger generation tends to be more progressive than their predecessors. This is most certainly true in China, where adolescents and young adults are constantly pushing the normative boundaries of traditional culture. Many of the signs of such progressive natures are readily visible in the young people, themselves. Their preferences for clothing, music, and hairstyles are quite similar to those of their counterparts in other modernized countries. Young men with visible tattoos and young women with blonde hair would have drawn considerable condemnation in the previous generation but are now regarded as normative, at least among young people. Obviously, with internet access and greater exposure to the worlds of young people outside of China, adolescents and young adults in China can readily assess what they deem to be popular, and then adjust their appearance, accordingly. In the realm of intimate relationships, though, young people have few, if any, reliable sources of information. Contemporary youth cannot easily ask their parents how to ask someone out on a date and, more importantly, how to go about holding hands, kissing, or having sexual intercourse. Not only would such conversations be incredibly awkward for both the young people and their parents, but there is also a substantial likelihood that

the parents literally had no experience when they were young, themselves! This is what makes mate selection in contemporary China so intriguing, as the younger generation is, to a great extent, creating their own contexts, standards, and norms for intimate relationships. It is an evolving landscape being painted by the very actors who live within it.

Adolescents in China are not different from their counterparts around the globe and often desire a boyfriend or girlfriend. However, their teachers and school administrators will actively prohibit such relationships (at least on the school grounds). Among many young people, then, a “relationship” may involve merely walking to and from school, together. College students, who often revel in the newfound freedoms they have, now removed from their parents’ mindful eyes, want to have relationships, as well, but often simply do not have any clear notions as to how to go about doing so. Frequently, their “relationships” are largely comprised of sharing their thoughts and feelings over WeChat or other cellphone apps. These sorts of approaches to intimate relationships may seem quaint, and even a bit naïve, to many observers. At the same time, though, many young people also want to engage in sexual intercourse, which would seemingly require building a love relationship with a partner over an extended period of time. Once, again, young people in China are forging their own paths concerning intimacy. Many college students, for example, will again turn to online websites and cellphone apps, searching not for a love partner but merely a sex partner. The physical act of sexual intercourse is often regarded in a more pragmatic manner by many young people, who do not always associate love with sex.

As we began to consider the various approaches to love and romance among young people in China, we also became increasingly aware of the evolving context of love and romance. The nation has, of course, undergone tremendous economic advancement over the past several decades. As a consequence, there is a growing middle-class population whose preferences for larger homes, cars, and comfortable lifestyles are reflective of the increasing materialism in the society. Change in one social institution typically impacts every other social institution, and this is most certainly the case in China. The very notion of dating, spending time together, apart from others, for the purpose of sharing some leisurely activity, has become swept up in the culture shift toward materialism. Young couples now need to have meals in nice (and, typically, expensive) restaurants. Gifts, such as flowers, candy, and jewelry, have become almost essential elements within dating relationships. These materialistic shifts, though, are not only occurring in the real world but also in the virtual realm. Contemporary young women and men go to great lengths to photograph themselves having fun, being in love, and embodying the very essence of romance, and then share the images online. Once they post images online, young couples eagerly await the comments of their friends, who will typically give “likes” and positive affirmations concerning the love shared by the young couple. Such behaviors have a cyclical pattern, wherein the more others believe a young couple to be in love, the more the young couple feels compelled to validate those beliefs by sharing even more images. Of course, the irony is that most of the photos are staged and do not necessarily represent the real nature of the young couple’s relationship.

Mate selection in China is made even more complicated by the characteristics of the youth population. Specifically, the skewed sex ratio, resulting from the family planning policies instituted decades earlier (which, in turn, became associated with selective abortion and female infanticide), has created an environment wherein there are millions more young males than young females. The demographics of mate selection are not lost upon young people, themselves, as many young men openly express their distress, realizing that the odds of finding a spouse are not in their favor. Many young women, on the other hand, are well aware of the fact that they have, in effect, become a scarce commodity. In conjunction with the increasing rates of female college degree attainment, there is an empowerment among women, as they feel that they have control over their life trajectories. In the context of a culture, which has been fiercely patriarchal for thousands of years, the elevation of women's status, and particularly their desire for control over matters concerning intimate relationships and fertility, is nothing short of astounding. Despite this, many young women (especially those who are well educated and successful in their careers) continue to deal with the stigmatization of their single, unmarried status. The label of “shengnü” continues to be applied, even today, yet their prospects for finding a suitable spouse (equally well educated, and preferably with egalitarian attitudes) are slim.

Understandably, an exclusive focus on love and romance would completely overlook both the complexity and outcomes of mate selection in contemporary China. Like many advanced nations, China's population is rapidly aging. The expansion of the elderly population is creating a greater need for support, which, traditionally, has come from adult children and their spouses. With a decrease in the marriage rate, the needs of the elderly are rapidly becoming a huge societal dilemma. The demand for wives has not gone unnoticed by criminals, as human trafficking, kidnapping, and prostitution have all increased over recent years. Along its southern borders, in particular, human trafficking has become a tremendous problem. Problems such as the needs of the aging population and the increases in various crimes are all directly related to mate selection, and these problems are not going to simply go away.

Simply put, we wanted to obtain a better understanding of this evolving landscape of dating and mate selection. Rather than focusing simply upon one dimension, we hoped to thoroughly consider both the causes and the consequences, therein. While some dimensions were quite pleasant to examine, such as young people's notions of love and romance, other dimensions, such as human trafficking, were decidedly distasteful. Nonetheless, in order to fully comprehend the nature of mate selection in China, today, we needed to provide as complete a picture as possible. Although we provide a variety of data, throughout the following chapters, we also include survey data and interviews that we collected, along the way. Our samples are comprised of college students, drawn from a variety of urban universities, from across several different provinces, and were collected from 2015 through 2019. We were pleasantly surprised to discover that the overwhelming majority welcomed the opportunity to discuss matters pertaining to dating and mate selection, particularly as these were topics that they largely never discussed with their parents! We wish to extend our most sincere thanks to all of

those who participated, along with our hopes that their relationship aspirations are fulfilled. Special thanks are given to our sociology colleagues in China and to Zhuzhu Cheng, Yiren Yang, and Shi Dong (Lesley), all of whom were very helpful in the collection of data. Extra special thanks go to Sha Luo, who not only assisted in the collection of data but also whose loveliness graces the cover of this book. Finally, we wish to extend our most heartfelt appreciation to our respective families, without whose love, support, and patience, this project would not have been possible. 谢谢大家 (Xièxiè dàjiā)!...

Sampson Lee Blair
Timothy J. Madigan
Fang Fang

Chapter 1

History of Family Dynamics and Mate Selection in China

Introduction

112 AD, Guangling, China

Shang Lihua sat, sobbing quietly, in a grove of trees located on the far end of her family's farm. Several days ago, her mother had whispered that her father had important news to share with her, and she needed to go to him, quickly. Lihua had listened, respectfully, but yet in disbelief, as her father informed her that she was going to marry Kang Liu, the third son of the local scholar-official. Lihua's older brother aspired to become an administrator but had yet to be allowed to take the civil service examination. Lihua's father openly declared to his daughter that, with her marriage, the local official would be obligated to assist her brother in his career. While explaining the impending marriage to his daughter, Lihua's father mentioned that the betrothal gifts from the Kang family would arrive the following day and, once a suitable dowry was delivered in response, the wedding would occur. At no point did her father ask how she felt, nor did he even consider such a concern. The marriage would provide her brother with the means of becoming a state official and thus elevate the status of her family in the local community. The fact that Kang Liu was eight years her senior, with a reputation for drinking and gambling, did not matter. Lihua knew that her fate was sealed and, despite her complete lack of emotional or physical attraction to Liu, she would keep her feelings to herself, and do as her father had bade her to do. Several days later, after the exchange of the dowry, she packed her few belongings, said goodbye to her family, and moved to her new home. From this day, forward, she belonged to her husband and was now obligated to serve him and her new family.

2021 AD, Shanghai, China

After completing her MS in biochemistry at the University of Toronto, Cheng Liling was immediately offered a job with a pharmaceutical company in Shanghai. She was delighted, at first, because it meant that she could live in the same city as her parents and could see them as often as she liked. Her job was fulfilling, paid well, and Liling enjoyed her lifestyle, as she had her own apartment and was going to purchase a car,

soon. After several years, though, her parents began to openly press her about when she was going to find a boyfriend. Liling had dated several men, since returning to China, but found them to be far too conservative for her tastes. Liling's mother, who worked as a teacher, mentioned that their neighbor's son, Qian Yuxuan, had recently moved back in with his family, after finding work with a local engineering firm. Liling winced at the mention of his name, recalling the many years that Yuxuan had taunted and teased her in school, making fun of her height, as she had always been taller than most of the boys. Liling's mother told her that she had passed along her WeChat ID to Yuxuan's mother, as she also thought that the two of them would make a good couple. Liling bit her tongue, wanting to tell her mother to stay out of her personal life but also knowing that her mother would never understand such a brazen declaration. Forcing a smile, she looked at her mother and said that she looked forward to hearing from him.

China sits atop the longest continuous history of any contemporary civilization, dating back several millennia. It has grown from a collection of feudal states, experienced a long imperial period, undergone a variety of wars and revolutions, and has ultimately emerged as a superpower nation. Its population of approximately 1.4 billion people is the largest on the planet (though it will soon be surpassed by India), and its industrial might is such that products bearing the logo "made in China" are to be found in virtually every household around the world. The past century, in particular, has been one in which the nation has transformed itself from a largely agrarian and rural society into one that is decidedly modernized and urban. Indeed, the rapid modernization of the nation, following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, has been nothing short of astonishing. Modernization has brought about substantial changes in lifestyles, as material consumption has become a driving force within the culture. The growing middle class has developed tastes for larger homes, automobiles, and the associated creature comforts of a middle-class lifestyle. A cursory glance around its modern cities leaves visitors amazed by the display of wealth and the decidedly futuristic orientation of the larger culture.

While China has most certainly undergone considerable modernization, which has impacted all of its social institutions, many of the components of its long cultural history are still quite salient in the lives of its people. The cultural tapestry is woven from tenets of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, each of which has had a substantial influence upon existing social norms. Among these tenets is the core belief of filial piety – the expectation of allegiance, obedience, and devotion to one's family. Filial piety, within the Chinese context, stipulates that children must respect and obey their parents, from childhood through their adult lives. As their parents grow old, filial piety also requires that adult children attend to the needs of their aging mothers and fathers, no matter whether those needs involve financial, emotional, instrumental, or any other forms of support. Devotion to the family, quite simply, is eternal and absolute. The various belief systems of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism were also consistent in their construction of gender roles, both within and beyond the family. Males were deemed to be the authority figures, while women were expected to assume secondary and

subservient roles. Even within the context of filial piety, an elderly widow would not become the authority figure, following the death of her husband. Instead, her eldest son would, thereafter, bear that title and authority. For the entirety of its cultural history, filial piety and patriarchy have been present and have readily influenced a wide variety of norms and social relationships.

As the opening vignettes demonstrate, one constant across all of its history is that Chinese culture has always been both pro-marriage and pro-natalist. Young females and males have always had to deal with the societal expectations that they obtain a spouse and, eventually, have children. Anthropologists and sociologists typically refer to these expectations of marriage and childbearing as cultural universals, as they are found in all societies. Within the Chinese context, however, such expectations have undergone considerable change over its long history. During the Han dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), for example, arranged marriage was the exclusive means by which young people became married. Parents, either on their own or with the assistance of a local matchmaker, would locate a suitable partner for their daughters or sons. Once located, the parents of each prospective partner would meet and work out acceptable agreements concerning the exchange of matrimonial gifts (brides' prices and dowries), and the details of the marriage would be agreed upon. Following the marriage, the bride would leave her parents' home and move to her new home, where she would serve her husband and her new family. A common expression of the time (and still today) was that daughters, once married, were like "spilled water," meaning that they no longer belonged to their own families but to that of their husbands. Once married, young wives were expected to bear children, as quickly as possible, and preferably to bear a son, so that the lineage of the family could continue.

In the contemporary regard, young women and men carry the appearance of modern and independent young adults, who seemingly can choose their own path through life. Over the past several decades, the female educational attainment rate has increased dramatically, and female college attainment rates have surpassed those of males. Marriage, while still expected by parents and grandparents, does not carry the same urgent weight among contemporary youth, who are typically focused upon education, careers, and the pursuit of a comfortable lifestyle. Across the country, both marriage and fertility rates have steadily declined over recent years, while divorce, cohabitation, and singlehood rates have increased. Such changes may signal a dramatic shift away from traditional norms, yet those same norms remain quite influential in the lives of contemporary youth, who can readily feel the pressure (especially from their own parents) to marry and have children. Modernization within the larger society, though, has also brought about a degree of autonomy and independence among young people, thus leading to an inevitable conflict with the more traditional standards and expectations of previous generations. Within this ever-evolving social landscape, young women and men often find themselves caught between their own desires to be more independent and the lingering need to be compliant to traditional norms. Mate selection in contemporary China, quite obviously, is complicated, as the factors influencing how individuals find a partner, along with the form of relationships they are seeking, are complex. Likewise, the consequences of mate selection are equally

complicated, as a variety of social problems, such as prostitution and human trafficking, have arisen from the demand for wives by males who, due to the skewed sex ratio in the population, find themselves facing slim odds of locating a spouse.

In order to fully understand the nature of mate selection in China, today, it is necessary to first provide a thorough understanding of the history of the cultural context in which contemporary young females and males go about seeking a partner. The long history of cultural elements such as filial piety, patriarchy, and the nature of marriage, itself, has been thousands of years in the making. Hence, this chapter will examine the long history of China, its culture, and give specific focus to the historical periods, which have had bearing upon mate selection, marriage, and fertility.

6000–1700 BC Neolithic Period

The area known as China today has been occupied by humans for over 200,000 years. Some 8,000 years ago, people began settling in the major river valleys of China. They engaged in simple farming, with life centered around clans. Their culture is referred to as “Yangshao” (Chi, 1957; Price & Feinman, 2001). The Cishan culture left evidence of agriculturally based town life and an apparent clan-based society given the clustering of shelters in small groups (Hsu, 2012, p. 29). Another early culture, the Longshan, left bones from domesticated animals, farming tools, and processed jade (Chi, 1957; Xie, 2009). One culture on top of the Yellow River, the Qijia, was found to have bronzeware. Another, the Liangzhu, in Zhejiang province, contained evidence of altars and elaborately decorated jade ceremonial utensils. The Hongshan culture left evidence of goddesses in the form of clay statues and beautiful jade dragons (Han, 2008). At Dawenkou culture sites, tombs of apparently powerful and wealthy individuals contained jade axes, ivory combs, drums, and white pottery (Hsu, 2012). These early forms of culture unearthed by archeologists across the central swath of China proper and its edges, taken together, formed the core of China’s emerging civilization (Hsu, 2012; Xie, 2009).

The views held then of family and gender are apparent through examination of the many artifacts unearthed. Burial sites contained many more remains of men than women. The graves of men were more likely to contain agricultural tools; those of women contained items for processing and storing the harvest, ornaments, needles, awls, and spindle whorls. Male graves typically contained more items than the female graves. In addition, precious items, including those related to ceremonies, were found almost exclusively in the graves of men (Hinch, 2018). Sometimes several young women were buried with a man, suggesting polygyny or concubinage. Sacrifices of living animals and humans were found more often in the graves of men. Patriarchy was apparent through men retaining more valuable objects and the socially important activities connected to them. Differentiated roles increased the ability of a man and women to jointly survive through divided but complementary production of essentials, namely, food, shelter, and clothing (Hinch, 2018).

According to legend, a dynasty called the Xia existed even though no hard archeological evidence exists (Clements, 2019). It had multiple kings who held power over a territory containing subgroups and emphasized virtuous behavior and talent. Picking their most dutiful sons to pass power on to, they set an example for people to serve their parents in a likewise manner. Rewards and punishments existed for the purpose of encouraging people to reflect on their actions and to perform good deeds (Xie, 2009). Archeological evidence from places associated with the center of the Xia dynasty contains burnt bones and bronze objects. These and other objects such as jade, ivory, gold, and cauldrons suggest a society based on differentiated social ranks. The elite appear to have been trying to communicate with ancestors or gods (Clements, 2019). Since no names of leaders have been found on the artifacts, they cannot be definitively fixed to the Xia dynasty. Rulers took particular care to manage their acceptance by the masses. However, some rulers steered off course by engaging in too much drinking of alcohol and seemingly immoral behavior such as taking multiple wives. Raids on and alliances with rulers in nearby areas happened. One king was recorded as saying that if people obey him, then they will be rewarded by the king's ancestors. If not, then they and their ancestors would be put to death at the altar to the spirits of the land (Clements, 2019).

Historians in China's past who described the type of society that existed in pre-history reveal some foundational social norms (e.g., the *Book of Rites*). Men were to love their parents and the sons of others in society. Concern was to be given to the aged and others in need such as widows, orphans, and the sick. Gender expectations were apparent: proper work for men and females in the home. Choosing men of talent, virtue, and ability set the course for patriarchal gender relations. Indeed, the early sage kings were all men. By engaging in the above thinking and social behaviors, a great harmony could be achieved in society, leading to periods of prosperity (Xie, 2009). Archeological evidence and legends paint a picture of early Chinese culture. Family and blood ties were crucial, given the repeated reference to clan-like social organizations. Movement to some higher form of social organization entailed encouraging individuals to expand their thinking beyond the clan social sphere. Humans advanced by exerting power over physical nature in the form of controlling plants, animals, and materials – a new form of “energy” (Hsu, 2012). Progress also occurred in the symbolic realm through humans exerting power over others in the form of higher-level beliefs to guide social behaviors. They established a system of social relations based on quasi-religious beliefs (Hinch, 2018). The family, patriarchal and patrilineal in form, served as the primary foundation.

1600–1050 BC Shang Dynasty

The Shang dynasty left evidence of its existence. In the town of Anyang, medicine was produced by grinding up “dragon bones” unearthed by farmers. These cow shoulder blades and bottom plates of turtle shells were determined to contain early Chinese writings (Clements, 2019), known as oracle bones. Decorated

bronze vessels with three or four legs were also discovered, bearing elaborate carvings of creatures such as tigers and birds (Chi, 1957). Compared to other settled societies entering the bronze age (e.g., Egypt), the bronze vessels of the Shang period were of all shapes, considerably more decorated, and displayed the upmost in craftsmanship skills, and their writings provide another picture of social life (Han, 2008).

An agricultural society existed in the Yellow River valley. Peasants grew food and craftspeople made tools, clothing, ornaments, and weapons (Murphey, 2010). A royal family appeared to be in control, and the members lived in walled palaces. Advisors and diviners predicted the future. Animal and *human* sacrifices occurred when the king died to help in the afterlife. The Shang believed that spirits of the dead ancestors spoke to the living through the oracle bones. Diviners scratched questions onto the bones. Will the state win the next war? Will a flood come? The bones were heated until cracks developed. The entire outcome was then interpreted for answers from the ancestors (Chang & Chang, 1978; Tsien, 2011). The artifacts and their ways of being used meet the criteria of religion (Roberts, 2004). People possessed communal beliefs and sought explanations for the good and bad occurring in their lives through ancestors and spirits. The world was divided into sacred and profane realms: special places for worshiping, objects with ceremonial value and powers, a supernatural world occupied by various beings, and priests who communicated with the sacred sphere. These symbols, beliefs, and rituals were functional – together they conveyed the beliefs and they brought about a sense of awe.

The writing system of the Shang was highly developed, with approximately 5,000 words (Murphey, 2010). Communication and unification with other groups of people in nearby areas could have been facilitated through the writing system. The Chinese system is the oldest one in continual existence in the entire world (Han, 2008). The unique writing system, being based on pictographs and hence understandable to people who spoke varying dialects, helped to fuse the various cultures that existed in China and contributed to their continuous evolution, as opposed to fragmentation and extinction (Han, 2008; Hsu, 2012).

The Shang made animal sacrifices to the gods and ancestor spirits. A ceremony to a river god involved the drowning of a virgin to be “married” to the river. Tombs of Shang aristocracy contained human sacrifices, and in some cases, concubines were sacrificed wholly intact (Clements, 2019, p. 45). The history of concubines in China goes back to the Shang dynasty and before indicating that polygamy was normative. One tale of the great Sage King Yao describes him marrying both of his daughters to his meritocratically chosen successor to the throne, thus bypassing his son (Clements, 2019). Having more than one wife tends to be found in societies that have a sex ratio imbalance, households seeking productivity and social prestige advantages, or a need to forge political ties (Kottak, 2015). The latter two factors apply to society in ancient China. The last Shang king supposedly loved drink, food, and women so much that he neglected his duties to respect the gods, bringing an end to the dynasty (Clements, 2019).

Pictographs preserved on the Shang dynasty oracle bones provide some of the best glimpses into China’s ancient culture and also established the foundations

of the Chinese language. Gender expectations are clearly represented in Chinese characters (Madigan & Fu, 2020). The character for male (pronounced “nan” in pinyin) is made up of two pictographs, one for field and the other for strength. The character for female (or “nu”) is made up of a pictograph depicting a woman’s curvy body. It can be found in the word for peace or peaceful. When the word for female is combined with the word for child, a new word and meaning are formed, that of a quality, good (or “hao”). The figurative composition of the characters conveys social expectations for men: strength, work, and providing sustenance. Women are associated with childbearing and passivity. BurrIDGE and Ng (1999) found that the character for female shows up in four types of words: (1) kinship, (2) women-related things such as childbirth, (3) female attributes such as in this case the word for peace or passive, and (4) a large set of negative ideas (e.g., false/cunning, jealous, coerce, greed, envy). A system of patriarchal gender expectations was embedded within the written language (Hodge & Louie, 1999).

Marriage was written and spoken in two different ways depending on the person’s gender (Lin, 1989). For men, it involved the character for *take* followed by the character for female discussed previously (qu nu in Pinyin). For women, it was the character for female followed by the character for *home* (qu jia). These words suggest a male-dominated society where men forcefully took a wife and women submissively joined their husband’s household (Chang & Chang, 1976; Han,



Image 1.1. Bronze Sacrificial Vessel of the Shang Dynasty.

2008). In modern times, the communists attempted to eliminate the ancient ways and “emancipate women” by promoting a new expression for marriage: to marry or *jie hun* in Pinyin (Chang & Chang, 1976). The word *xiao* in Pinyin represents filial piety and it is made up of two pictographs. The first one is that of an old person (man) and represents the word for old (*lao* in Pinyin). The second is that of child (or son) as described previously. Taken together, the visual message appears to be young people putting on their back and caring for the older family member (Han, 2008; McNaughton & Ying, 1999). The character has origins in the Shang dynasty and Confucius established it as being the core individual moral value and pursuit in his philosophical system over one-thousand years later. The word for father, *fu* in Pinyin, is that of a hand holding a stick symbolizing the expression of authority. The word for mother, *mu* in Pinyin, is that of woman described previously with an additional line and two dots added to symbolize breasts (Go, 2004). The submissive pose containing breasts for feeding infants expresses docility and maternity. Even in death, Shang women were buried without any material possessions, while the graves of men typically contained weapons and valuable items. The secondary status of women, vis-à-vis men, was quite evident through the Shang period (Hinch, 2018).

1050–771 BC Western Zhou Dynasty

Warring factions, with the help of disgruntled slaves, brought the Shang dynasty to an end (Murphey, 2010). The new Zhou state adopted a militaristic outlook, as well as an ordered civil life. The first two Zhou leaders, Kings Wen and Wu, were highly esteemed in later Confucian thought. The brother of King Wu, Duke of Zhou, was a well-respected administrator who ran the kingdom while the King was a boy and honorably fulfilled his duties without trying to usurp power (Chin, 2007). King Wen was upheld as an example of how a man should have many sons, with some rulers having a hundred or more (Eberhard, 1996, p. 61). Daughters, however, were deemed worthless. One poem in the *Book of Songs* describes how a newborn son is given a jade scepter that symbolizes a wand held by a ruler, while the girl is given a toy spindle whorl. The latter’s symbolism is of a domesticated life, producing clothing, free from troubles (cited from Waley’s *Book of Songs*, p. 54 in Hinch, 2018). Some poems focused on the ideal female beauty: tall, slim, and light complexion, while others discussed character traits, such as being responsive to the husband, filial piety to elders, loyal, and productive. Few women were described as brave, strong, and self-assured. Finally, some poems described love feelings and their direct and symbolic expression including sexual innuendo. One written image conveys a woman having fallen in love with a handsome man that she had longed for and might have met at the large festival involving neighborhood villages – the complete opposite from arranged marriages (Hinch, 2018).

Social harmony during the Zhou period was short lived. Land was given away to supporters, but later, the noblemen in power raised armies and turned on the Zhou king. Everyone guarded their own kingdoms and vied for power over the larger remnants of the Zhou kingdom, producing unsettled times (Murphey, 2010). The Zhou enslaved women when victorious in battle, and women slaves