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COURTSHIP, LOVE AND PREMARITAL SEX IN A NORTH CHINA VILLAGE*

Yunxiang Yan

Because the union of a young couple affects the institution of the family, establishes an alliance between two kin groups and can have repercussions on social standing, in many traditional societies parents control their children's marriage choices, and romantic love normally plays only an indirect role, if at all.¹ In the modern age, as is well known, there has been a worldwide shift away from arranged marriages. New patterns of courtship based on free choice by young couples have emerged as a consequence of social and economic changes that encompass formal education, urbanization, migration, non-family employment, and individual access to wage incomes. The triumph of free-choice marriages is a global development,² and China is no exception.³

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¹ See, e.g., William J. Goode, "The Theoretical Importance of Love", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (February, 1959), pp. 38–47.

² William J. Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (New York: The Free Press, 1963); Michael Mitterauer and Reinhard Sieder, *The European Family: Patriarchy to Partnership from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), Chs 5 and 6; Antoine Prost, "Public and Private Spheres in France", in Antonie Prost and Gerard Vincent (eds), *A History of Private Life*, Vol. 5 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 1–143; Paul Rosenblatt and Paul Cozby, "Courtship Patterns Associated with Freedom of Choice of Spouse", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 34 (1972), pp. 689–95; and Arland Thornton and Hui-Sheng Lin (eds), *Social Change and the Family in Taiwan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³ Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell, "Introduction: The Impact of Post-Mao Reforms on Family Life", in Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (eds), *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 5. Also see the essays in Davis and Harrell; also William Parish and Martin Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

Most researchers have taken the approach of analysing China's family revolution by examining the extent to which political revolution and social transformation have impacted on the family,⁴ or, as in a 1995 study by Martin K. Whyte, they have used the changing patterns of courtship to gauge social and economic changes in the larger society.⁵ It remains unclear from these studies how individuals feel, experience and exercise the freedom of spouse selection.

The increasing importance of intimacy in courtship is a major finding of my recent research on changing patterns of rural courtship in northeast China. While confirming a continuation of the trends generalized by Parish and Whyte in their 1978 study in rural southern China, particularly the shift from arranged marriages to free choice,⁶ my study reveals some important developments in the direction of intimacy, emotionality and individuality that set the present apart from the patterns found in the 1970s. Since the early 1980s, fiancés have been able to explore new ways of emotional expression, to cultivate intense attachments to one another and, increasingly, to engage in premarital sex. The focus of change has shifted, in short, from the young people's pursuit of greater autonomy during the 1950s and 1970s to this new generation's experience during the 1980s and 1990s of love and intimacy, which in turn has profoundly influenced the rise of individuality among rural youth.

In the following pages I will briefly introduce the field site and the changing patterns of spouse selection and courtship from 1949 to 1999. Next I will examine the increasing availability of social space over the past five decades and will explore three aspects of the newly developed intimacy in courtship: the emphasis on emotional expressivity and communicational skills, new images of an ideal spouse, and the phenomenon of post-engagement dating that involves premarital sex in many cases. I conclude the article with a discussion of the implications of the increasing intimacy in courtship.⁷

⁴ See, e.g., Elisabeth Croll, *The Politics of Marriage in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (eds), *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*; Marion Levy, *The Family Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949); and Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

⁵ Martin King Whyte, "From Arranged Marriage to Love Matches in Urban China", in Chin-Chun Yi (ed.), *Family Formation and Dissolution: Perspectives from East and West* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1995).

⁶ See Parish and Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China*.

⁷ For changes in other dimensions of private life in Xiajia village, such as the conjugal relationship, gender roles, privacy and sociality, management of family property, support of the elderly and birth planning, see Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming in 2003).

A Sketch of the Field Site

This paper is based on information collected during seven fieldwork trips to Xiajia village, Heilongjiang province, between 1989 and 1999. With a population of 1,492 in 1998, the village remains a farming community, but after decollectivization in 1983, villagers' livelihoods have been increasingly tied to the market.⁸ To gain a higher profit from farming, villagers all switched to growing a high-yield maize that is used as animal feed. They sell the commercial maize to the state and to private buyers and then purchase wheat and rice for their own consumption.⁹ Despite this market strategy, the village's heavy reliance on agriculture has been a major impediment to better living standards.

Since the start of rural reform, the average per capita income in Xiajia has been slightly below the national average—it was 528 yuan in 1988 and 616 yuan in 1990, while the national average in these two years was 545 yuan and 623 yuan, respectively. Farmers faced hard times in China during the 1990s, and the living conditions of most villagers barely improved from the 1980s. Official figures during the 1990s became less reliable as the rural economy stagnated and village cadres came under pressure to inflate their achievements. For instance, Xiajia's reported per capita income in 1997 was 2,700 yuan, a figure that even the village cadres openly admitted was false.¹⁰ The real average per capita income in the late 1990s, according to the calculations of several key informants, stood at about 1,000–1,100 yuan.¹¹

Since the late 1980s, seeking a temporary job in a city has been an important means to earn a cash income for a large number of villagers. For those who were too young to receive contracted land in 1983, it is a major way to survive. In 1991, 106 Xiajia residents worked regularly outside the village for longer than three months a year. The number had increased to 167 by 1994, and this trend continued throughout the second half of the 1990s. An increasing number of unmarried young women joined the pool of temporary migrant labourers, coming

⁸ For a discussion of the effects on different households' livelihoods and status, see Yunxiang Yan, "The Impact of Rural Reform on Economic and Social Stratification in a Chinese Village", *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 27 (January 1992), pp. 1–23.

⁹ There was no rural industry in Xiajia village during the collective period. Several grain-processing factories were established in the 1990s, all of which were small family businesses. Sidelines are important source of cash income for many villagers, particularly women. By the summer of 1999, more than 30 per cent of Xiajia families were raising dairy cows and selling milk to a joint-venture Nestle factory in the county seat, and several dozen families ran chicken or pig farms. However, these sideline businesses remain small scale.

¹⁰ For a more detailed account on the history and social organization of the village, see Yunxiang Yan, *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 22–42.

¹¹ Villagers' estimations are not accurate either, as they customarily do not consider as income their consumption of self-produced foods, such as grain, vegetables and eggs.

to constitute approximately one-third of the village's out-migrant seasonal workforce. The experience of being a migrant worker, often in cities, has had a profound influence on the attitudes and behaviour of young villagers.¹²

Choosing a Spouse in Xiajia Village

During my fieldwork in 1998 and 1999, I surveyed 484 marriages entered into by male villagers between 1949 and the summer of 1999.¹³ Following the conventional typology of spouse selection used in many existing studies, I have classified the 484 cases into three categories: free-choice matches, where young couples become engaged without the assistance or interference of a third party; matches-by-introduction, where couples were introduced by a relative, friend or professional matchmaker; and marriages arranged by parents. Table 1 summarizes the findings.

Table 1: Patterns of Spouse Selection among Xiajia Men, 1949–99

	Arranged marriages		Matches-by-introduction		Free-choice matches		Total number of cases
	%	N	%	N	%	N	
1949–59	73%	28	24%	9	3%	1	38
1960–69	11%	8	82%	61	7%	5	74
1970–79	5%	6	79%	101	16%	21	128
1980–89	0		81%	107	19%	25	132
1990–99	0		64%	72	36%	40	112
Total		42		350		92	484

¹² For further discussion on the impact of this urban experience, see Yunxiang Yan, "Rural Youth and Youth Culture in North China", *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1999), pp. 75–97.

¹³ I used documentary sources to track marriage cases and then gathered ethnographic data on each of these through personal and group interviews. Documents included the 1982 and 1990 census, village household registers and records of population control in 1999. It was impossible to gather complete information about the marriages of Xiajia women, because there is no written record of such weddings inasmuch as when a woman marries out of the village her register is transferred to her husband's village.

This information clearly demonstrates a shift toward free-choice matches over the past five decades, from a mere 7 per cent in the 1960s to 36 per cent in the 1990s. This trend was accompanied by a sharp decline in arranged marriages—from a dominant 73 per cent in the 1950s to a mere 11 per cent in the 1960s and none at all in the 1990s. But Table 1 also shows that the majority of Xiajia villagers throughout the past four decades have been introduced to their spouses by an intermediary.

Such a tripartite classification is commonly used in studies of spouse selection in China.¹⁴ However, this typology cannot reflect the complexity of matches-by-introduction. In practice, the formal introduction often results from previous interactions between a young man and woman. In some cases parents exercise a heavy influence through the intermediary, and in others the introduction is only a formality after the young couple has already started a romantic courtship in private. Yet there are also cases where parents and the young people reach a compromise. As Parish and Whyte observed: “In most cases mate choice involves double approval and a double veto power; both the young people and their respective parents must agree. Few young people are pressured into a match, and few couples marry in defiance of parental wishes”.¹⁵

To focus on the actual decision-making practices, I have followed the approach previously used by Parish and Whyte and have reclassified the 484 cases in my survey into two categories. The first is “youth dominance”, which includes both cases of free choice and of matches-by-introduction in which the couple played the dominant role or took the initiative. The second category, “parental dominance”, covers both arranged marriages and matches-by-introduction in which the parents played the dominant role. The results of this reclassification are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Dominance in Spouse Selection in Xiajia Village, 1949–99

	1949–59	1960–69	1970–79	1980–89	1990–99	Total
Parents	87%	38%	28%	25%	24%	
Young couple	13%	62%	72%	75%	76%	
(N)	(38)	(74)	(128)	(132)	(112)	(484)

¹⁴ See, e.g., Xu Anqi (ed.), *Shiji zhe jiao Zhongguoren de aiqing he hunyin* (Love and Marriage among the Chinese at the Turn of the Century) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue Chubanshe, 1997).

¹⁵ Parish and Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China*, p. 173.

Here it is interesting to compare the Xiajia case with Parish and Whyte's 1978 study. Parish and White found that parental dominance in mate choice had declined from 83 per cent in the 1950s to 41 per cent by the mid-1960s and to 38 per cent by the mid-1970s.¹⁶ My Xiajia survey reveals a similar trend of increased youth autonomy, as cases of parental dominance fell from 87 per cent in the 1950s to 28 per cent in the 1970s. However, this trend halted at the level of the 1970s, as parents still played a dominant role in nearly a quarter of the marriage cases during the 1980s and 1990s. Does this mean the growth of youth autonomy reached a ceiling by the end of the 1970s?

To understand this phenomenon, we must take two factors into consideration. First, it is unrealistic to expect the total disappearance of parental participation in spouse selection. Given that some youths even today rely on their parents to take the initiative in this, the crucial question here is to determine whether the young people agree to a given choice of spouse. To answer this some Chinese scholars use a more case-sensitive standard in their surveys, distinguishing between "parents dominate, children dissatisfied" and "parents dominate, children satisfied".¹⁷ Moreover, as the terms parental dominance and youth dominance focus mostly on who makes the initial proposal in a given case, these labels tell us little about the actual interactions between young men and women in the process. This is particularly problematic in dealing with the more recent cases, as virtually all engagements since the 1970s have been based on the young people's consent, which made the presence or absence of parental involvement in spouse selection less important than before.

The survey figures alone, therefore, cannot present the whole picture about the complex dynamics of courtship. For instance, a scrutiny of the matches-by-introduction marriages reveals that love and affection also have a place in many of these cases, a finding that echoes Victor De Munck's observation of "romantically motivated arranged marriages" in rural Sri Lanka.¹⁸ Two trends deserve close attention. In most cases of village endogamy, brides and grooms already knew their prospective mates before they were formally brought together by an introducer. The introducer, who could be a relative, a friend, a leader of the collective or even a semi-professional matchmaker, often serves as an intermediary to negotiate the amount of marriage gifts exchanged between the two families. Actually, in some cases, an introducer is called in only for ritual

¹⁶ Parish and Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China*, p. 174.

¹⁷ See Xu, *Shiji zhe jiao Zhongguoren de aiqing he hunyin*, p. 44.

¹⁸ In an excellent analysis of romantic love and cross-cousin marriage, De Munck argues that the dichotomy between romantic love and arranged marriage has prevented scholars from understanding the complex richness of the emotional world of villagers. He shows that more than 70 per cent of the cross-cousin marriages arranged by parents actually involved prior romantic love, concluding that "contrary to conventional wisdom, romantic love does play a significant role in a community where parents officially select an offspring's mate", *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1996), p. 711.

purposes, because the couple has already worked out all the details, including the amount of bridewealth and dowry. In the second type of introduction, couples do not know each other well beforehand, but they fall in love during the post-engagement period. This type is more normal in cases of village exogamy, especially among couples where one of the betrothed lives far away from Xiajia village.

Finally, even in some cases of spouse selection where the opinions of the parents dominate, couples develop romantic feelings after their engagement. In 1998, for instance, the son of an ordinary household was engaged to the daughter of the Party secretary. The son's mother favoured the engagement, which she regarded as a personal victory in establishing a powerful kinship alliance, and thus she offered a very high bridewealth. Her son initially was rather passive, merely accepting his mother's aggressive arrangements. But once he and the girl got to know one another after their engagement, he became a vigorous suitor who would do anything to please his fiancée. She taught the preschool class in the village school, and he often accompanied her to her class, helping her to maintain classroom order and to collect the homework. Some children became confused and told their parents that they had two teachers in their class, which quickly became a local joke.

The Social Space of Courtship: 1950s to 1990s

In their 1978 study, Parish and Whyte concluded that, "in considering freedom of mate choice, the most important things are the opportunities young people have to meet or to be introduced to a potential mate".¹⁹ This applies to Xiajia, where the availability of social space stands out as one of the most important factors in the development of romance and intimacy. After the land reform campaign, various forms of meetings and public rallies became a part of village life. Many villagers belonged to Party-sponsored organizations such as the Youth League, the Women's Association, the village militia, and the Association of Poor Peasants, which held their own meetings and activities; while Party members had regular Party meetings and study lessons.²⁰ Village youths were also mobilized to participate in various forms of public activities sponsored by the collectives, such as the village performance troupe, movie shows, sports activities and organized volunteer work.

According to many informants, the 1960s and 1970s were a springtime for the new patterns of courtship. The leadership in Xiajia village in the early 1960s took the lessons of the Great Leap seriously and tried to focus on agricultural production in a pragmatic manner. As a result, productivity started to improve,

¹⁹ Parish and Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China*, p. 180.

²⁰ For a detailed study of village political life during the collective era, see Anita Chan, Richard Madsen and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village under Mao and Deng* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), Chs 1–9.

and the village enjoyed relative peace and prosperity during the subsequent two decades. The stable collective economy provided a good base for the development of a new style of public life, centring on the promotion of collectivism and socialist values, and of a new social space whereby village youth of opposite sexes could meet together in various social activities.

Movies and basketball matches provided occasions that were ideal for courtship. As many villagers recalled, there were always a number of young men and women who purposely chose to stand at the outer edge of the audience and who paid more attention to each other than to the movie screen or basketball match. Working in the fields, however, offered the most frequent opportunities for young villagers to see, talk and work for many hours together among peers of the opposite sex, especially during the busy seasons of spring ploughing, summer hoeing and autumn harvesting.

The collectives were officially dismantled by the end of 1983, and by the following spring villagers found themselves tending numerous small plots of farmland, working with only family members. Many villagers recalled that initially it felt odd to work apart from other villagers. The youths particularly disliked this new type of family farming because, as one of them put it, it was "boring and cold".

A yet younger generation, which had grown up in the late 1980s and early 1990s, did not benefit from the land distribution in 1983 and thus became landless labourers in the village. They, more than other villagers, needed to seek jobs outside the community. As noted, the experience of working in cities has had a profound influence on their values and aspirations. This has created a generational gap in village society. A 20-year-old man relates:

My parents always tell me what I should do, how I should talk with people and what kind of family I should have in the future. This is all rubbish. They do not realize how pitiful their lives are and how little they know about the world. My father has never gone more than 200 kilometres away from the village, and my mother only visited the county seat twice. They probably know no more than thirty people outside the village, all of whom are our relatives. I've worked in five cities in the past three years, including Beijing, and I am acquainted with several hundred people. Yesterday my mother tried to teach me how to talk properly with a girl, because she is trying to find a wife for me in her parents' village. But she doesn't know that I had a girlfriend when I worked in Beijing and I know everything about women. Isn't this funny!²¹

Once in the cities, young villagers frequently have encountered urban prejudices and stereotyping of peasants.²² To survive in this modern yet hostile urban setting, villagers have to rely on support from their own social networks. In

²¹ Yan, "Rural Youth and Youth Culture in North China", p. 80.

²² See, e.g., Pun Ngai, "Becoming *Dagongmei* (Working Girls): The Politics of Identity and Difference in Reform China", *The China Journal*, No. 42 (July 1999), pp. 1–18.

daily life, they also have turned to the opposite sex to relieve their loneliness and fears. Through these contacts, a number of young villagers fell in love while working outside Xiajia village, and some of them brought their partners back to Xiajia to marry. My survey shows that, among the free-choice marriages in the 1990s, more than 30 per cent involved romances entirely outside the village.

Even those who have not left the village have been strongly influenced by visions of modern urban life. Public activities in the village have declined since the 1980s, and leisure activities have shifted to private homes. Owing to the rapid development of television and other means of mass media, the influx of information and images from the cities and foreign countries has replaced the former organized sociality with a powerful but mostly imaginary space whereby villagers develop and pursue new life aspirations.

In 1978 several young Xiajia villagers walked for five miles to another village to watch the first television set in the local area. By 1991 there were 135 televisions in Xiajia alone, including 8 colour sets; by the end of the 1990s, virtually every household owned a television, and some had two. While still under state control, Chinese television programming has changed profoundly to adapt to market competition.²³ For instance, as early as 1991 I found myself watching "Hunter"—the American police series—in Xiajia village, the same show that I had watched in Boston several months earlier. In the summer of 1997, for several weeks I joined a small group of villagers watching a Taiwanese soap opera about love, marriage and money. The young women in particular were attracted to the comfortable middle-class lifestyle as well as to the modern values of family life depicted in the series. When older villagers had difficulties following the plot, the younger members of the audience explained the story to them, at the same time lecturing them about modern family life. In 1998 I saw two large posters of pop stars (a Hong Kong man and a Japanese woman) hanging in the bedroom of a 19-year-old, the son of an old friend. The father told me that his son was a fan of several pop stars and his dream was to become a professional singer. Under the impact of a global flow of information and images, the imaginary social space that villagers can appropriate has expanded far beyond the physical and social boundaries of Xiajia.

Ways of Expressing Love

Despite the strong influences flowing in from outside the village, casual recreational dating remained an alien idea to Xiajia youth in the 1990s. Any effort to attract someone of the opposite sex is meant to build a bridge to marriage, although this bridge of courtship has become much extended and widened by the standards of earlier generations.

²³ See James Lull, *China Turned On: Television, Reform, and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 1991); and Zha Jianying, *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

During courtship there are a range of terms to express romantic love and affection. Among them, the most frequently used are *xihuan ni* (I like you) and *xiang ni* (I miss you) or *libukai* (meaning “cannot be separated from”).²⁴ The word “love” (*ai*) has also appeared in the discourse of courtship in recent years, but mostly to refer to another person’s experience, such as who loves, or does not love, whom. But in a somewhat dramatic case, when a girl was scolded by her parents for having sex with her fiancé, she defended herself by saying, “I love him” (*wo ai ta*). I was told that some village youths do use the word in a face-to-face situation, but thus far I have not witnessed any such usage. According to some informants, young men tend to be bolder and more direct in face-to-face expression and thus tend to use the word “love” more frequently than do the young women. But during conversations among same-sex peers, young women tend to use the word “love” more often than the men. A common practice among both genders is to use the words of pop songs that contain the expression “I love you” or similar messages. Pop songs have proven to be a user-friendly and effective means of emotional communication, and those who can use this strategy skillfully are praised as romantic or admirably suave.

The declaration of romantic love can sometimes be very passionate, as shown dramatically in 1998. A poor and conservative father was strongly opposed to the young man whom his daughter had chosen for herself, because the father considered the young man’s family too poor to pay a handsome bridewealth. This was unusual, because by the late 1990s most parents did not object to their children’s marriage proposals on such grounds, since the monetary gifts go directly to the girl instead of her parents.²⁵ It is said that one day the daughter asked her lover if he really loved her and wanted to start a family with her. The boy swore that he did. Then the girl asked for proof of his love. Saying nothing, the boy found a knife and, before the girl could react, he chopped off the tip of his left little finger. The girl was deeply touched and left Xiajia with her boyfriend to work in two successive cities for nearly a year until she became pregnant. When I was in Xiajia village in the summer of 1999, they had just settled in with the girl’s father, paying less than a fourth of the bridewealth he had demanded, and they had held their wedding in the village. Because of his heroic demonstration of passionate love, the boy not only won absolute devotion from the girl but also had a moral advantage over her family.

Unlike village youth of the 1990s, older residents in Xiajia tended to be much subtler in expressing passionate affections during courtship. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, recalled many villagers, love and intimacy were hinted at by words, body language and small considerate favours. Indeed, almost every

²⁴ It should be noted that these emotional expressions are also used in non-romantic relationships, such as when expressing inter-generational attachments. In most cases the specific context of speech determines the actual meanings of these words.

²⁵ See Yan, *The Flow of Gifts*, pp. 182–92.

gesture and act in everyday life could be regarded as a signal of love, although only those who are involved in the interactions can appreciate it.

For example, a 43-year-old woman said that her future husband always passed her good cards when they played poker during work breaks, and after he continued to do this for a while the other team members began to tease her. "That was how the whole thing [courtship] started", she noted. A man told me that he and his wife had worked in the same production team and had been good friends for several years without any further development in their relationship. One evening, during a political meeting at the production team headquarters, he told the gathering that if any children of his did not do well in school he would throw them out of his house. All of a sudden, his future wife's face turned red, and her friends began to tease her. "I realized at that moment that she liked me and wanted to give birth to my children. That was why her face turned red", the man concluded.

In a case dating back to 1972, a girl from a cadre family was fond of a young man in the same production team, and would try to talk to him when they worked in the fields or ask him to help her in her chores. It happened that the young man spoke with a bit of a stutter when he became excited or embarrassed. One day during the harvest season, he stuttered for half a minute to tell the girl: "Let me help you sharpen your sickle". Fellow team members overheard this and laughed out loud. Within a couple of days, everyone in the village knew the story and many would purposely repeat his words in front of each of them. The public teasing actually made hitherto submerged feelings between them much more clear and explicit, and by the end of the harvest season the girl told her family that she wanted to marry the young man. Her parents tried to put a stop to her seemingly silly idea, because the young man's family held the class label of upper-middle peasant, which carried with it an undesirable political status during the early 1970s. But the girl persuaded her parents and eventually married the young man with her parents' blessing and the provision of a dowry.

A 39-year-old villager recalled that the first time that he became aware of any special feelings toward his future wife, then a shy and pretty girl from the same production team, was during a harvest break in 1979: "I was sharpening my sickle when she called my name from behind, holding a small muskmelon in her hand. She asked me if I wanted a half of a melon that she had just found in the cornfield. I asked, why me? She turned red and said that I was really bad. From that moment I knew she liked me, and I wanted to marry her. And I did. I always teased her that our real matchmaker was that small muskmelon".

The Vocabulary of Courtship

When discussing courtships, the most frequently used word to describe a couple is *banpei*, which means good matching. *Banpei* is an old word that is used in ancient books and popular operas as well as villagers' conversations. However, the specific elements that constitute a good match have changed greatly since the 1950s. It used to mean a match of family status and economic standing between households, but now the meaning focuses more on personality and other individual traits. When I pressed young villagers to explain what constitutes a

good match, there was general consensus about two elements—*dui piqui* and *you huashuo*.

The Chinese phrase *dui piqui*, which literally means having matching tempers, also includes such matching characteristics as personal hobbies, speaking patterns, and so on. The word can be used to describe conjugal relations, but in practice it often refers to the mysterious feeling of mutual attraction between lovers—“chemistry” in colloquial English. For instance, a couple explained their love at first sight during a wedding in 1998 in terms of *dui piqui*. When the young woman’s parents attempted to show her that in fact their personalities were in many aspects really opposites, she told her parents that *dui piqui* cannot be explained: “I just feel that he suits me, and I fit him”. I tried to discuss the matter with her in terms of the language of romantic love. But, again she simply felt that there was close bonding and attraction between her and her boyfriend, refusing to accept my characterization of their case as an example of romantic love. Weight is placed on this notion of *dui piqui*, and it is not unusual for younger villagers, particularly women, to find the absence of *dui piqui* a sufficient reason to call off an engagement.

The expression *you huashuo* literally means “to have things to talk about”, and its absence during courtship constitutes another common reason to break off an engagement. However, the standard of “having something to talk about” is subjective and varies greatly from one individual to another. A young man nicknamed Xiaobailian (little white face) is widely praised by young women as a good conversationalist, while older villagers dismiss him as always “talking nonsense”. I discovered that the young man understands contemporary urban life fairly well because he has worked in several cities and, more importantly, is a great fan of Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop songs. He has a large collection of musical cassette tapes (all by Hong Kong and Taiwan pop stars) and he can recite many of the songs (he rarely sings them as he has a poor voice). As most pop songs are love songs, he can carry on a romantic conversation by way of the verses.

In a very different kind of case of *you huashuo*, a man fell in love with a young woman because she is a devoted Christian and a capable self-appointed preacher. She is known for being capable of telling Bible stories for hours without taking a break. Many villagers found her preaching annoying, yet this young man was interested in Christianity and thus felt that they had a lot to talk about.

The contemporary emphasis on *you huashuo* to a great extent derives from the official propaganda regarding marriage reforms during the first three decades of socialism, when having a “common language” (*gongtong yuyan*) was promoted as a major criterion in spouse selection. The official definition of “common language” varied in accordance with the changing priorities of national politics, but the stress on shared aspirations and goals remained a core value for the new ideal type of revolutionary couple. But young people today always use the phrase “common language” as a reflection of their intimacy and closeness, whereas the older generation tended to use it as a marker of a matching social status between two families. For instance, in the 1970s, when the younger sister

of a village cadre fell in love with a boy from a family with a bad class label, her family rejected her choice outright with the comment: "How can you have a common language with someone from a bad class family?" Both manipulating and being influenced by the then dominant official ideology, the girl replied cleverly that she wanted to help the boy become a revolutionary and thus they shared a lot of common language when they talked about their revolutionary ideals. By the 1990s, although parents still questioned the existence of a common language whenever they felt a couple was not a good match in terms of status, young couples no longer needed to resort to political rhetoric to defend themselves. Instead they stressed the importance of communication in an intimate relationship.

In sum, generational differences in expressing one's affection suggest a shift from more symbolic, indirect and work-related modes of expression (such as shared foods, mutual help or body language) to vocal, more passionate and more direct forms of expressing love and intimacy. In comparison to their parents and older siblings, village youth of both sexes in the 1990s mastered a wider range of love words and they were more open and skillful in communicating their affections. Those who were incapable of communicating love and intimacy encountered increasing difficulties in attracting the opposite sex.

Changing Notions of the Ideal Spouse

Strictly speaking there was hardly any discussion about ideal spouses *per se* when parents arranged most marriages in the 1950s. The parents on each side were looking to forge advantageous new kinship ties. An ideal spouse from the young people's perspective was not taken into consideration. The discourse on ideal spouses (rather than of ideal affines) first emerged during the collective period and underwent a radical change in the post-collective era.

According to older villagers, the preferred spouse during the collective period of the 1960s and 1970s was a decent person (*laoshiren*, in local terms) who had a good temper, was hard working, and respectful of the elderly and the leaders. Physical strength was a priority for both young men and women, because the ability to earn work points was a major factor in a household's livelihood. Family background was also important but was judged differently for men and women. From a young woman's perspective, it was important to make sure that the young man's family was in good shape financially, but from his side, the moral reputation of the young woman's family was more important, as this was believed to determine the girl's personality. Class labelling was another element related to the family rather than the individual to be considered in spouse selection, but it had more of an effect on the marriage chances of men than of women (class labels were inherited through the male line and so would affect the prospects of their children). For those who had political ambitions, political standards were also counted. For instance, during the early 1970s, two of the top male youth activists in Xiajia village were not recruited into the Communist Party, nor were they appointed as cadres, because they had married women from families with the class label of landlord. They were criticized for having wives who could become "time bombs" of counterrevolution. For a period of

approximately ten years, class labels were seriously considered when ambitious young villagers chose their spouses.²⁶

Here the term *laoshi* deserves a closer look. Depending on the context, it can mean a cluster of personal attributes, such as honesty, frankness, good behaviour, obedience, naiveté and simple-mindedness.²⁷ Among these, obedience and honesty were emphasized more frequently in everyday discourse. Until the early 1980s, being *laoshi* (obedient and honest) was a highly regarded merit in village society, and *laoshi* young men were normally welcomed as an ideal spouse (even the local Party organizations preferred to recruit *laoshi* youth). But in the post-reform era, *laoshi* has gradually taken on a negative connotation, and anyone who is labelled as *laoshi* is looked down on by ambitious young women. When asked why, women commented that *laoshi* men can easily be taken advantage of or cheated in today's society and thus they can hardly support a family well.

Laoshi is a quality adaptable for in-group interactions. When villagers were basically confined within the close-knit local community and interacted only with others in the existing social networks, the connotation of *laoshi* as trustworthy and reliable gave credit to character traits that could reduce the transaction costs within village society. However, the other attributes associated with *laoshi*, such as naiveté and a trusting nature, can be fatal shortcomings outside the local community during the post-reform era when villagers have to deal with strangers in an unregulated market environment. Under such new circumstances, *laoshi* invites aggression and cheating; a *laoshi* husband can hardly provide the kind of security that prospective brides desire. For almost the same reason, more than half a century ago, Lu Xun, the famous writer, observed that in Shanghai in the 1930s, *laoshi* was synonymous with uselessness.

Young women in Xiajia, however, are not simply pragmatic. A number of them maintain that they do not like *laoshi* young men because they are not articulate (*buhui shuohua*) and lack attractive manners (*meiyou fengdu*). These are singled out by village women as important traits of an ideal spouse, which are in direct conflict with obedience and simple-mindedness.

This was first brought to my attention in 1991 by a 27-year-old man who had encountered several failures in his search for a wife because he was frowned on as *laoshi*. When he told me that he sought after young men and women were those who were considered *fengliu*, I did not take him seriously. When I had lived in the village in the 1970s the word carried a very negative meaning in local

²⁶ For a systematic study of the impact of political-ideological standards on spouse selection during the Maoist period, see Elisabeth Croll, *The Politics of Marriage in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

²⁷ Andrew Kipnis observes that in rural Shandong, being *laoshi* is one of the desirable qualities for an ideal spouse; he also suggests that the core element of *laoshi* is self-sacrifice, instead of being honest in the sense of expressing oneself. Andrew Kipnis, *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China Village* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 112.

usage, and I was a bit shocked when in my subsequent fieldwork several informants confirmed that *fengliu* was indeed one of the new standards for an ideal spouse.

According to the dictionary definitions, *fengliu* has three connotations: (1) a person who is celebrated for having both career achievements and literary talents; (2) a person who is talented yet does not stick to social norms; and (3) a person who is loose and lascivious.²⁸ In village society, only the third connotation was widely used in everyday discourse prior to the 1990s: describing a man as being *fengliu* was the equivalent of saying he was a womanizer, while a *fengliu* woman was licentious and promiscuous.

When asked what the word *fengliu* meant in the 1990s, villagers gave various answers. In general, a young man who is handsome, clean, well-dressed and, more importantly, knows how to talk (*hui shuohua*) is considered by young women to be *fengliu*. A woman is regarded as *fengliu* if she is pretty, knows how to dress and use make-up, and is capable of socializing.²⁹ If we understand the local term *hui shuohua* as meaning articulate, it becomes clear that by the 1990s Xiajia youths had picked up the two positive meanings of the word *fengliu* and regarded them as positive characteristics of the ideal spouse. Further inquiries with village youth convinced me that the new meaning of being *fengliu* has come from contemporary pop culture, primarily love songs and soap operas.

When asked what kind of speech their grandsons had to master to become *fengliu*, several older men told me: “Nothing serious. It’s all *erpihua* (meaning sex talk)”. This echoes the sexual aspect of being *fengliu*. But when I asked several young women the same question, their answers were much more complicated. One told me that a young man should know how to make his girlfriend happy, and it is the way he speaks, not the exact content of his speech, that matters. A pretty and straightforward woman admitted that she liked to hear her boyfriend praise her beauty and admire her when she dressed up. Disagreeing, a third young woman insisted that *hui shuohua* means a man knows how to express his feelings: “Not like my father who could never say anything other than to scold us. I hope my future husband can say nice things and also teach me things that I don’t know”. It is clear that, at least for these women, knowing how to speak means being appreciative and supportive in conversation.

How serious are these women about the ideal spouse’s verbal skills? An answer lies in fate of an old friend’s son. This young man was known for being hardworking and good-tempered, but he was not at all vocal. According to some of his peers, he could work for an entire day without saying more than three sentences; but he was always a good listener. A family friend had tried to set up a marriage for him three times by the summer of 1998, and all three attempts had

²⁸ See, e.g., *Xiandai hanyu cidian* (The Modern Chinese Dictionary) (Shangwu Yinshu Guan, 1982), p. 324.

²⁹ The formerly negative connotation of the word, however, is still used in everyday life. For instance, a person involved in an extramarital affair is also regarded as being *fengliu*.

failed. In the first case, the young woman turned him down shortly after they met. The second time, he was already engaged and had gone on a trip with his fiancée to take an engagement photo (more on this below). The supposed three-day trip lasted for only one day; his fiancée then called off the engagement, telling the young man's parents that he did not know how to talk. In the third case, he was invited to visit a young woman's family after their first meeting, and again failed the test for the same reason. When I left Xiajia village in 1999, he was still on the marriage market and was even quieter than before.

The image of an ideal spouse in the 1990s also has had a materialist orientation, which was equally obvious among both young men and women, although some gender distinctions could be detected. The ideal spouse for a young woman should meet the following qualifications. Economically the prospective groom should come from a well-off family; young women hesitated even if poor families were willing to offer a higher bridewealth. When asked why they had fallen in love or had a special feeling toward their future husband, more than a dozen female informants cited the financial situation of the man's family as one of the key factors. A second important qualification was the young man's capability to make money. It should be noted that physical strength and ability to farm are no longer the most important qualities for an ideal husband. In their stead is the ability to gain an income through non-agricultural jobs, notably skilled work. Finally, physical appearance is also important. In the 1990s, young women favoured young men who were handsome, tall and light-skinned (the latter being a sign that he did not have to do farm labour). But, as noted, male attractiveness also depends to a great extent on communication skills and emotional expressiveness.

Young men judge an ideal bride by similar standards, yet in a different order of importance. Beauty is a top priority, which includes a good body shape (i.e., slim, with a good figure and well-developed breasts). Other personal traits include whether the girl is romantic (*fengliu*), and if she knows how to dress up and use make-up. It is not important whether the girl is capable of working in the fields, because nowadays farm work is much less demanding in terms of physical strength; and the government's family-planning policy also means a smaller family and therefore less strenuous household chores. The next concern is a woman's personality—whether she has a good temper and is gentle and sweet. Villagers believe that personality traits, such as good temper and kindness, are inherited through family lines, so the personality of her parents is also considered. The final factor is, as expected, the economic conditions of the young woman's family.

Dating and Premarital Sex among Engaged Couples

A significant development in courtship is the increasingly intimate interaction between a young man and young woman after their engagement. The local custom requires a period between engagement and wedding that may last from a few months to two years or even longer. According to older villagers, before the 1949 revolution parents always arranged their daughter's marriage when she was still young, normally before she turned 16, and a long engagement often ensued

until the girl was old enough for marriage. In the post-revolution period, however, the main reason for a long engagement has more to do with the preparation of lavish bridewealth by the groom's family.³⁰ When the groom's family is financially ready it will normally push for an early wedding, but in some cases the bride's family is reluctant to let the daughter go because of her contribution to the family economy.

During the 1950s and 1960s, local customs allowed an engaged couple to visit each other a few times before their wedding. But unless absolutely necessary, for example because of long distances, a visiting future daughter-in-law had to return to her family on the same day. It was not unusual, though, for a young man to stay at his future wife's home for a few days if his parents-in-law needed his labour or other assistance. Given the lack of transportation during that time (few villagers owned bicycles until the late 1970s), a same-day visit meant little more than having a meal at one's future in-laws' house. Indeed, the real purpose of the visit was to reaffirm the newly established affinal ties (and for a visiting son-in-law, to offer free labour), given that the visitor spent almost all of her or his time with prospective in-laws, rather than with her or his future spouse. Several older women related that they had been afraid of such visits because they did not like to be subject to critical observation and were afraid to speak with their future in-laws. Many found excuses to skip the scheduled visits.

Beginning in the early 1970s, engaged young women participated in the purchase of their wedding gifts, a development that would have scandalized their mothers' generation. The engaged couple made a ritualized trip to the county seat or the provincial capital of Ha'erbin to buy clothes and other personal items catalogued on the list of bridal gifts that had been agreed on in the engagement negotiations. On the trip they also sat for an engagement picture in a professional photo studio. More importantly, many couples spent a night or two together at either the home of an urban relative or a hotel. In the latter case, the production brigade office issued to them an official introduction letter that indicated they were a couple from Xiajia village and should be offered assistance. This official letter entitled them to rent a single room at a hotel as a couple, which a number of village youths did. The visit to town was called "taking an engagement photo" (*zhao dinghun xiang*) and it became a "must" for all engaged couples in the 1970s.

The effects of this custom have been twofold. First, it improves the groom's family's opportunity to cement a marriage contract, because an engaged couple's stay together in a hotel room implies sexual activity. In public opinion a de facto marital relationship has been established: as the villagers put it, "raw rice has become cooked" (*shengmi zhu cheng shufan*). Second, travelling and living together for a few days gives the couple a feeling of conjugal union and leads them to make plans for their future life, and this is believed to promote mutual

³⁰ For a detailed study of the changing practice of bridewealth in Xiajia village, see Yan, *The Flow of Gifts*, Ch. 8.

affection and emotional ties between the two. As one informant recalled: "After the trip my son's heart was stolen by his bride; he always defended the girl when we criticized them for spending too much during the trip". This development toward conjugal solidarity is generally deemed to be against the interests of the groom's family, especially the groom's mother.

A further trend in the 1980s and 1990s was for the engaged couple to enjoy intimacy at the home of one of their parents, in what may be regarded as the local version of dating. Initially, a young woman visiting her fiancé's home was allowed to stay for several days, but she spent little time alone with her future husband inasmuch as she had to participate in family activities during the day and sleep with a female in-law at night. Mutual visits between engaged couples increased considerably during the 1980s, and by the 1990s it was not uncommon for a young woman or man to stay several weeks or more in each other's home. Young couples could now spend much more time alone in a separate room, thanks to house remodeling since the late 1980s;³¹ naturally, intimacy of all sorts developed behind closed doors. This was a remarkable move away from traditional customs that occurred right under the eyes of the parents. As many informants noted, it has led to the surge of premarital sex among engaged couples.

Until recently premarital sex was a social taboo that was carefully observed by generations of young villagers. The local term for premarital sex is *xian you hou jia*, which literally means "first have it, and then marry". The phrase "have it" has two meanings: sex before marriage, or pregnancy. A baby born not long after marriage was referred to as *wuyuexian* (a fresh [fruit] of five months). Premarital sex that did not lead to pregnancy was kept secret by the couple.

According to my survey and interviews with older villagers, premarital sex was rare during the 1950s and 1960s, because of a strong expectation of bridal virginity and because engaged couples had limited space and time to be intimate beyond the watchful eyes of family members. Moreover, the official ideology throughout the first three decades of socialism opposed premarital sex, denouncing it as the product of corrupt attitudes, as witnessed in the decadent lifestyle of the rotten capitalist societies.

Several older informants recalled how strict the rules had been when they were young. A villager friend told me that after he secretly developed a close relationship with a young woman who later became his wife in 1967, they were

³¹ Owing to the severe winters and widespread economic shortages, villagers in Xiajia and the surrounding areas have lived in quite crowded housing conditions ever since the beginning of settlement in this area during the early 19th century. It remained common until the early 1980s that a big family—men and women of two or more generations—slept in the same room and often on the same heated bed (*kang*). The traditional dwellings, however, were swept away during a wave of house construction and remodelling that started in the mid-1980s. By the 1990s villagers were competing with one another in terms of new house designs, separating living rooms from individual bedrooms and even building a shower room inside the house. For a detailed account, see Yan, *Private Life under Socialism*, Ch. 5.

both very nervous and cautious. He said: "We often went to the fields during the night and stayed there for a long time. I touched her body many times but did not dare to go further, because we both knew if she were to become pregnant our reputations would be ruined".

Attitudes toward premarital sex changed profoundly. In 1991, when I attended a wedding in the village, I was surprised by some participants' "no-big-deal" reaction to the bride, who was four months pregnant. It was not until 1998, however, that I found anyone willing to discuss the topic of premarital sex in detail.

On a hot Sunday morning during the summer of 1998, I was discussing the changes in conjugal life since the 1949 revolution with Mr Liang, a 50-year-old schoolteacher and one of my key informants over the past ten years. He recalled that ever since he could remember he had never seen his father sleeping together with his mother—the old man was never at home except during meal times and late at night. Even during the long winter season when villagers had nothing to do in the fields, his father would leave the house and hang out with his friends. Turning to the current younger generation, Mr Liang shook his head and said that sometimes the changes were a bit too much.

In the 1980s, he said, it became common practice after the engagement ritual for the girl to stay at the boy's home for a week and then leave to take the engagement photos. Liang estimated that in about one-fifth of the cases in the mid-1980s, one-quarter in the late 1980s, and more than one-third in the late 1990s, the couple engaged in sexual activities during the home visit. This is most likely to occur at the young man's home, because his parents are apt to perceive this as a way to reconfirm the engagement contract. Mr Liang observed:

To be frank with you, this kind of thing happened right here in my own house. On the day that my eldest son became engaged, he asked his mother if it was okay to let his fiancée stay over for a couple of days, because she wanted to help us hoe the fields. We were very happy that the girl was so considerate. The girl was indeed a very good labourer, and she worked with my wife and my son in the fields all day long. Everything was fine until the next morning when I discovered that she had moved out of our room and had slept with my son in the storage room. Both my wife and I were upset and ashamed, but my wife changed her mind after a while, telling me that it was really a good thing because the girl would never want to leave our son. I agreed with my wife, for women always know these kinds of things better than men. So, on the second night, we did not even bother to make up the bed for the girl in our room, and she simply disappeared with my son after dinner. I was just amazed how energetic these youngsters were! You know, after a whole day of hard labour, they still had the spirit to play! Well, I would have been too ashamed to tell you this before, but it is so common now, and I no longer care.

Liang noted that the same experience was repeated with his second son in 1987 and his third son in 1991. "It became a family tradition here", he said wryly.

Several national surveys show that premarital sex among the younger generation increased rapidly everywhere in China during the 1980s. One survey showed that by the early 1980s, 24 per cent of villagers regarded premarital sex

among engaged young couples as something “permissible” or “unimportant”.³² According to an urban survey conducted by Zha and Geng in the late 1980s, “Forty-one per cent of the males and 30 per cent of the females thought that premarital intercourse was not wrong and was entirely a private affair. When premarital intercourse occurs between fiancés, few think it immoral or unchaste”.³³ It is clear that premarital sex, a social taboo in the 1960s, had become a more accepted practice.³⁴

Although no one else was as open about the topic as Mr Liang, other villagers confirmed that premarital sex among fiancés had become increasingly common. Many older villagers rationalized that the young couple would marry and spend their lives together anyway. A younger villager argued that “nowadays, *kaidan* (the engagement ritual) means to be married; so it’s fine to sleep together”. Yet, more than was ever the case in the past, the engagement contract is frequently broken. Of the forty-two engagements that occurred during 1994 and 1997, for instance, five were later cancelled. Four of the five cancellations were initiated by young women; and at least one of these four is known to have had sex with her former fiancé.³⁵

³² See Zhongguo Nongcun Jiating Diaochazu (Survey Group on Chinese Rural Families), *Dangdai Zhongguo nongcun jiating* (Rural Families in Contemporary China) (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 1993), p. 53.

³³ See Zha Bo and Geng Wenxiu, “Sexuality in Urban China”, *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 28 (July 1992), pp. 1–22. A large-scale survey by Liu Dalin in 1989–90 showed that 75 per cent of the sampled college students held a positive attitude toward premarital sex, while 79 per cent of the married urban and rural couples in the same survey disapproved of premarital sex. See Liu Dalin (ed.), *Zhongguo dangdai xing wenhua* (Sexual Behaviour in Modern China) (Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Shudian, 1995), p. 305. In a study in the late 1980s, Xiao Zhou reported a rapid increase of premarital sex: “In my sample, 87 per cent (n=100) of urban working women and 11 per cent (n=100) of rural women had had premarital sexual intercourse”. Xiao Zhou, “Virginity and Premarital Sex in Contemporary China”, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1989), p. 283.

³⁴ Having read some Chinese media coverage about life in the United States, including the sexual revolution, Mr Liang was curious about the impact on the family of seemingly unlimited sexual freedom and also wondered how a society could sustain itself without the family. He was particularly interested in the dating culture in American society and disapproved of the idea that one could remain single for life and continue dating. After listening carefully to my sketchy description of American family life, he commented that he admired the more equal and friendly interpersonal relationships in American families but disagreed with the choice of remaining single. He concluded that personal freedom is good only when it can improve the quality of family life, because one’s life is meaningless without a good family.

³⁵ Fewer young men cancelled engagements because, if they did, their families could retrieve only part of the bridewealth that had already been given to the young woman. According to several female informants, however, young women have become much more “picky” (*tiaoti*) than young men in judging the quality of marriage and family life, and thus are more readily

To gain a sense of how many engaged couples might have had premarital sex, I examined the wedding dates and the dates of the delivery of first baby for every woman in the village since 1979 (the data were recorded in the village birth-planning files). Among the forty-nine couples who married between 1991 and 1993, thirteen had babies within eight months after their weddings, and of these thirteen couples, ten had babies within seven months. This shows that during this period at the very least one-quarter of the newlyweds engaged in premarital sex. The actual percentage presumably is far higher inasmuch as not every woman who has premarital sex becomes pregnant.³⁶

A pregnancy in these circumstances no longer bears any stigma. The above-mentioned villager who had fought to suppress his sexual drive when courting his wife in the 1960s told me that when he learned that the fiancée of his elder son had become pregnant in 1990, “It was an emergency but not a disaster. We simply had to have the wedding as quickly as possible, that was all”, the man concluded with a smile.

It should be noted that premarital sex among engaged couples is far different from the kind of dating culture that prevails in, say, American society or among trendy urban youths in major Chinese cities, where sex may be separated from intended marriage. The young couples in Xiajia are serious about their relationship and committed to one another by the time of their engagement. It is this commitment to marriage, together with the social charter of the engagement ritual, that legitimizes the young couples’ sexual intimacy. Sexual relations *before* engagement remain scandalous, and village youth, particularly young women, are usually very careful not to violate this. Interestingly, the development of sexual activity during post-engagement dating is quite similar to what David Schak found in Taiwan during the late 1960s and early 1970s.³⁷ In a more recent study in Taiwan, Thornton, Chang and Lin note: “Although there have been substantial increases in premarital sexual relations both before and after engagement ceremonies, the increase apparently occurred earliest in situations

dissatisfied with an engagement. Considering young women’s emphasis on emotional expressivity and communication skills during courtship, such an explanation is convincing.

³⁶ According to a large-scale 1999 survey on rural youth, premarital sex has been progressively on the rise in the 1990s. Among the respondents who have worked outside their home villages, 20.8 per cent had had premarital sex, while the rate among those who stayed within the village was slightly lower—16.8 per cent. See Zhongguo Qingshaonian Yanjiu Zhongxin (China Youth and Children Research Centre), *Xin kuaiyue: dangdai nongcun qingnian baogao, 1999–2000* (The New Leap: A Report on Contemporary Rural Youth, 1999–2000), (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), p. 195.

³⁷ David Schak, *Dating and Mate-Selection in Modern Taiwan* (Taipei: The Oriental Cultural Service, 1974), pp. 175–200.

where the couple's relationship has been publicized with an engagement ceremony".³⁸

Conclusion: Courtship, Intimacy and the Individual

In short, the Mao-era trend toward free choice marriage documented by Parish and Whyte has culminated in what I call a transformation toward intimacy in courtship by the end of the 1990s. As a result courtship has become an important and meaningful stage in the life course that village youths look forward to, and a new cultural form of post-engagement dating has emerged. This is characterized by the increasing occurrence of premarital sex, which to a certain extent has evolved into a socially accepted norm of behaviour. Parental attitudes toward post-engagement sex have changed from opposition to tolerance.

Moreover, in comparison to their parents and older siblings, village youths of the 1990s tended to be more open and vocal in expressing their emotions to their lovers and future spouses. In addition to conventional ways of caring, direct expressions of love have become a favoured form of emotional expression among youths. Pop culture and the mass media have had a direct influence on the development of the language of love and intimacy, and have enriched and altered the vision of an ideal spouse and the practice of courtship. The new emphasis on communication skills suggests that the imaginative and subjective world of the youths is expanding.

The construction of individual identities has emerged as an important part of courtship, and this more generally reflects the rise of individuality among village youth. In comparison to their parents and older siblings, Xiajia youths of the 1990s preferred to take their fate into their own hands; they enjoyed making decisions and had a strong sense of an entitlement to claim their rights. This growing sense of individual rights rests upon earlier shifts in local mores. Without the attainment of individual rights in spouse selection since the 1950s, village youth would not have been able to actively participate in the courtship process or transform it into an experience of intimacy. Similarly, without earlier shifts in gender dynamics in family relations and young women's rights to call off an engagement contract, there would not be the new emphasis on emotional expressivity and communication in the younger generation's vision of an ideal spouse.

The transformation of courtship also means an increasing demand for privacy. In the context of courtship, privacy is defined as a social and physical zone for the two individuals involved that is not open to the scrutiny of anyone else nor subject to the intrusion of parental authority. The practice of premarital sex among engaged couples became more common only after the young couple's

³⁸ A. Thornton, J. S. Chang, and H. S. Lin, "From Arranged Marriage toward Love Match", in Arland Thornton and Hui-Sheng Lin (eds), *Social Change and the Family in Taiwan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 164.

right to privacy was recognized and respected. The rise of intimacy in courtship, in short, represents the rise of the individual and the development of individual rights.

The increase of intimacy in courtship has had a direct influence on conjugal relationships and family organization in general. The demands for emotional expressivity and communication in courtship continue among many young couples after they marry. It is common to see young married couples walking side by side in the local marketplace (traditionally, couples rarely walked together in public and when they did the wife always followed the husband, keeping a distance of a few feet) or playing cards at home gatherings. Those who enjoy pop music also like to sing karaoke together; and interestingly, a karaoke machine has become a standard item in bridewealth, requested by many young women, a sign that young couples expect to spend more spare time together. The pursuit of conjugal privacy and intimacy has led young couples to defend their freedom and independence against parental or any other kind of intrusion. One of the most common complaints from young villagers is that their parents are too nosy and like to interfere in their personal business. My fieldwork research suggests that young couples who had enjoyed a more intimate courtship tended to start their independent households earlier by demanding a division of household property shortly after their wedding, and many of them have adjusted readily to the new policies that reduce the number of births.³⁹

Finally, while legitimizing personal desires and encouraging the pursuit of individual rights and privacy, the transformation to intimate courtship has also led to new forms of conflicts between young couples and their families. A good example was a marriage negotiation in 1989 in which a young man encouraged the young woman he had chosen to marry to demand a large amount of bridewealth from his parents. According to informants, he told her: "Just be tough. Ask for 4,000 yuan, and don't bargain. Otherwise, you won't be able to extract money from my mother's pocket". Meanwhile, he firmly stated to his parents that he would only marry that particular girl. The young couple got everything they demanded and, a few months after their wedding, they left the groom's household and established their own conjugal family. Some villagers gossiped that the young couple had already planned this split during their pre-engagement courtship.⁴⁰

In the final analysis, intimacy is about a gratifying relationship between two individuals to the exclusion of others. However, the emphasis on the individual is supposed to be balanced out by moral obligations and social duties to other individuals and the community. Viewing the transformation of intimacy as a sign of democratization of the private sphere, Anthony Giddens notes: "Intimacy

³⁹ For more details, see Yunxiang Yan, "The Triumph of Conjuality: Structural Transformation of Family Relations in a Chinese Village", *Ethnology*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (1997), pp. 191–212, and *Private Life under Socialism*, Ch. 4.

⁴⁰ Yan, *The Flow of Gifts*, pp. 195–6.

should not be understood as an interactional description, but as a cluster of prerogatives and responsibilities that define agendas of practical activity".⁴¹ In other words, there are no individual rights without obligations, and this principle should be upheld in the domain of intimacy as in the public sphere.

The above-mentioned 1989 case of marriage negotiation seems to go against the principle articulated by Giddens: the young couple felt a strong entitlement to claim parental support economically while demanding their independence at the same time. Unfortunately, in Xiajia village this case was not extraordinary. In recent years many village youth have acted in similar ways without openly declaring their intentions. The significant point reflected in these cases is that young villagers may now begin planning their conjugal family while they are still at the stage of pre-engagement courtship. As a result, along with the development of freedom in spouse selection and intimacy in courtship, bridewealth and dowries have been escalating since the 1980s.⁴² Similarly, when dealing with their parents or parents-in-law in other aspects of family life, such as the use of domestic space and the support of the elderly, young villagers tend to show little respect for the latter's interest while fiercely pursuing their own.⁴³ The emphasis on romantic love and conjugal intimacy serves the interests of the individual, not that of the family. The development of these self-centred emotions, together with the legitimacy of personal desires, is in conflict with the traditional emphasis on emotional bonding with parents and self-sacrifice for the goodness of the extended family.

As I note elsewhere,⁴⁴ the role of individualism affects other changes, such as a transformation of the power structure in the domestic sphere: namely, the decline of parental power, authority and prestige accompanied by the rise of youth autonomy and independence. Gender relations at home have also changed, as women, particularly young women, have gained more control over their own lives and have played a decisive role in transforming the domestic sphere. As a result the previous logic of intergenerational reciprocity has been redefined and

⁴¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 190.

⁴² For a detailed study of changing practices in giving wedding gifts in Xiajia village, see Yan, *The Flow of Gifts*, pp. 176–209. For a recent excellent account of the phenomenon from an institutional perspective, see Helen Siu, "Reconstituting Dowry and Brideprice in South China", in Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (eds), *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, pp. 165–88.

⁴³ See Yan, *Private Life under Socialism*, Chs 5, 6 and 7.

⁴⁴ See Yunxiang Yan, "The Triumph of Conjuality: Structural Transformation of Family Relations in a Chinese Village", *Ethnology*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (1997), pp. 191–212; "Rural Youth and Youth Culture in North China" *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1999), pp. 75–97; "Practicing Kinship in Rural North China", in Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon (eds), *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 224–44. and *Private Life under Socialism*, Chs 4–8.

new norms of support for the elderly are under negotiation. In these contested areas of private life, emotionality, desires and personal freedom have become not only legitimate aspirations but also part of everyday practice. The legitimacy of intimacy and personal freedom also result in the strong entitlement to defend one's rights against other individual members of the family and community, thus causing new forms of inter- and intra-family conflicts. The rising individual, thus, is incomplete and unbalanced. It is incomplete because most changes are confined to the sphere of private life; it is unbalanced because the emphasis on individual rights is not complemented by a respect for other equal individuals and a commitment to civic duties.⁴⁵

This leads us back to the question of the social significance of spouse selection that was raised at the beginning of the present study. The central argument I want to make is that the transformation to intimate courtship has changed not only the family organization but also the individual. Given that individuals make up the family and the society, it is at least equally important to examine the changing patterns of courtship from an individual perspective and to study intimacy and emotionality in their own right. The agency and moral experience of the individuals are as important as any institutional changes for a better understanding of the family revolution and modernization.

⁴⁵ Elsewhere I refer this phenomenon as the rise of "the uncivil individual" and analyse its development in the context of political and social changes over the past five decades. The major causes to the rise of the uncivil individual include: the role of state intervention in private life over the past five decades, the "organized sociality" during the collective era and its collapse since the decollectivization, the impact of the market economy and consumerism since the 1980s, the disjunction of public and private spheres in the post-reform era. See Yan, *Private life under Socialism*, Ch. 9.