

000412 Dating in China

Dating in China

No, I am not dating a Chinese woman here in China. For the past two weeks, the subject of my class with the teachers from my school has been dating and marriage. I wanted to give them something interesting to talk about and they were very amused. I began the discussion by explaining how dating, engagement and marriage generally work in the US based on my own experiences and those of my friends and family. In response, the teachers explained the Chinese perspective. The following is what I have compiled from both lessons as well as from Helen, my Chinese language tutor and from discussions at English Corner. In all, I have probably spoken with over 35 people about this subject because it was a lot more complex than I first thought. Not that I am obsessed by dating in China. But marriage is one thing that the US and China have in common, so I thought it would be interesting to see how it worked in China. I think that a lot of people in the US including myself were under the impression that the arranged marriage is still the predominant way of meeting people. However, that is not what I found.

Dating in the schools is not allowed. This includes middle and high school as well as university. Not that dating does not happen, but it must be done in secret. For example, students can have a rendezvous at a movie theater or go out with groups of friends and meet. However, if a teacher finds out that people are dating, they will be reprimanded. Since students spend most of their time at school, they must always be secretive.

Students at my school do date, but not seriously and it is always in groups. As one teacher said, "they do not think about the love." In regards to who you can date or how you meet, a lot of people are introduced to others by friends or family. The teachers told me that arranged marriage are no longer popular and now people marry for love. The arranged marriages supposedly went out with the birth of the communist state in 1949. However, the wills of the parents can be a big influence on who people marry. For example, there is one strong willed teacher at my school whose mother is insisting that she marry this one man in the military. The teacher does not want to marry him and in fact she says that she is sickened by the sight of him. None of the teachers at my school know about the engagement because she will not allow him to visit the school. The only reason that I know about it is because the strain of it all was too much for her and since she could not talk about it with another teacher, she spoke with Jason during a tutoring session. The teacher and the soldier have bought a house together, so she feels very locked into her fate. But, she plans to spend little time there and instead will live at the school or with her mother for most of the year. I hope that she calls off the wedding, because she is really in love with a doctor from her home town. It has all of the makings of a tragic love story for I know that she will marry the doctor.

That is not to say that all parents in China are like that. Parents are like those in the US. Some are adamant about who their child will marry. Others are more relaxed and are accepting of who their child chooses. However, most want their children to marry at the legal age rather than to get too old. In Shandong Province, the minimum legal age for

marriage is 25 for a man and 23 for a woman. Therefore, people love to play the matchmaker and I got offers for matchmaking during the lesson, which I politely declined. People in China also meet people through work, university or personal ads in the papers, just like in the US. The idea of meeting someone through chatting or email fascinated the teachers because they claim that few people in China do. However, something in the chatting is filling the internet cafes with chatting teenagers, so I suspect that more is going on than the teachers realize.

With the past year, couples holding hands has become acceptable in Yantai. According to Lisa, you never saw this sign of affection in the past. However, other forms of public displays of affection are still taboo.

Once a couple does decide to get engaged, it is a big deal. Present at the engagement will be the couple's parents and maybe other family members. I think that gifts are exchanged in addition to a possible ring.

However, like everything in China, once you think that you have something figured out, you discover that it is not as it seems. I have to conclude that the teachers at my school are a somewhat liberal bunch. I spoke to my Chinese tutor, Helen about the whole dating thing and she gave a much different perspective. Helen and her family are much more conservative and in fact she got embarrassed by our discussion. Helen said that people do not get engaged before getting married because the act of dating itself is the prelude to marriage. Helen's married, older sister only dated one man and that was the man that she married. Helen could not understand how people in the US could date more than one person in their lifetime, let alone break up with someone. The very idea of dating various people to find "the one" just was incomprehensible to her. I asked her how people then knew who was the right person to marry. She told me that people just knew. Helen herself knew someone in university who she was interested in dating. However, she felt that it was not a woman's place to initiate a relationship. She told me that women just can not initiate, but that it must be the man.

Helen further explained that once people were dating, marriage might be discussed, but not always. Finally, one day the couple will take their identification to the office that is responsible for marriages and they will get a marriage license. After they get the license, they will have the ceremony.

I can see both systems of dating and relationships existing in China, depending on the individuals upbringing and beliefs. Conversations with various people at English Corner confirmed that both do exist. However, I can also understand how Westerners can get into a lot of trouble by dating in China. Likewise, I can see how a Chinese person in the US could be upset by the differences in expectations.

Regardless of the system of dating, the marriage itself will take place at a hall or restaurant. However, the western tradition of a ceremony occurring in a church is gaining popularity, especially in big cities like Shanghai. The ceremony may occur in a church, but there is rarely a religious meaning behind it. In the past, a bride would wear a red dress. Red is a

color that means good luck and which became very popular after the Cultural Revolution. However, here too the Western influence is being felt with many brides opting to wear a white dress instead. The cost of the wedding is shared by the families of the bride and groom. The wedding itself is planned by the groom while the woman worries about herself and her dress.

Yantai is heavily populated my photography stores with gigantic pictures of brides or the married couples in the display windows. The bride may wear several different dresses for the photos which I thought must cost a fortune until I learned more about the photography stores. In the months prior to the wedding, the bride will go to a store where they will do her hair and makeup. There she can also rent the various dresses for the photos and the wedding. It is an all in one store that is a concept that could do well in the US so that people do not need to spend a fortune on one dress. The photos are all taken prior to the wedding and often one or more of the life-sized pictures will be displayed at the wedding, itself.

Prior to the banquet, the DJ will ask the bride and the groom to come to the front as well as their parents. There the bride and groom will bow three times: once to their parents, once to the gods and once to each other. Their friends and relatives may then have the DJ request that they do silly things such as each take a bite from an apple, or the like. Then there is the feast. The guest at the wedding include friends and relatives. The guests give gifts of money wrapped in red, with 100 yuan being the norm. In the past, the gifts also included a house given by the parents, but this is no longer common. After the wedding, the bride and groom will travel, the length of which is limited by how much vacation they get from work. The norm is more than 2 weeks, but my school only gives teachers 3 days.

Dusty Wind

Our two month anniversary of being in China was marked by the first rain storm that I have seen in Yantai. The prior few days have been so very windy as air coming down from Mongolia and Siberia tore through China. The strong winds carried lots of dust and in Beijing it has created quite a problem. The news warned of diseases in the dust and of low visibility. Hopefully the rain will clear the air. However, the temperature has dropped, resulting in the occasional snow flurry and a freezing apartment since the heat has been turned off for the year.

Classes

This past week marked the last time that I gave my grocery store lesson. I gave it a total of 15 times, but I never got bored of it and it is still my favorite. I teach the students the names of things that you can buy at the grocery store. I usually start by writing "noodles" on the board and then asking the students if they know the word. When they say that they do not, I reach into my bag and pull out a pack of noodles, much to their delight. They also loved it when I pulled out bread, chocolate, candy and a toothbrush. I will use this approach for teaching again. After I introduce and review the new words, we play a game where one

student is a customer and one student is a grocer. They come up to my desk and the customer says that he wants to buy jam, for instance. The grocer hands the customer the jam and says, "here you are".

This week, my other Junior one classes finished their pen pal letters. Some of the letters are lengthy and quite good. Other students could only get a few sentences down. I hope that the kids in the US like them!

My Junior 3 classes has a lesson in opinion vs. fact. I used magazine advertisements to discuss each. I borrowed a Rolling Stone from Jason because it had a great advertisement for a car in it. I think that it was for Toyota and the ad read "Don't have a personality, buy one!". What I forgot was that there was a barely clad Mariah Carrey on the front cover. I folded the magazine, revealing her producing "oohs" from the few students that saw and much embarrassment on my part. Great, I am going to be fired because of Mariah Carrey. I also had the students come up with their own ads for cars. They did great with blurbs like "driving our car is like having wings" or "our car will make you successful". These kids are ready for capitalism.

Email

Although Jason and I email quite frequently, we are not to be held responsible for the 3 new internet cafes that have opened outside of our school gates in the past 2 weeks. There are now 6 within easy walking distance. Clearly, the internet is gaining popularity here in Yantai.

Take Care,

Jeff

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