

At the Teahouse Café

Essays from the Middle Kingdom

By

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Chapter 2

The question of breeding (why foreign men get the “ugly” Chinese girls)

A recent article in the *The Nanfang* (“Answering the age old question: Why do foreigners marry ugly Chinese girls?”) gives me occasion to address a conundrum I too have long pondered—particularly as the author, Charles Liu, devotes a scant 375 words to the topic, excluding his quotations of Xu Xiliang, the Chinese female journalist who first posed the question in the magazine *iFeng Beauty*. Liu doesn’t moralize to the extent Xu does on the “materialism” of Chinese society that fosters superficial glamour over inner beauty, but he implies as much in his avoidance of any coherent statement of his own. The cover photo too is mystifying, featuring an attractive Chinese woman where I would expect to see a plain-faced one, perhaps with a certain sex appeal.

Countless interracial couples have I witnessed over my two decades in China, usually white guys and Chinese females but not a few black guys and Chinese females as well, along with your occasional Chinese guy and white female. The run of Chinese women I have seen with foreign men have been ordinary looking. So were the men they were with. Not terribly surprising, given that most people are ordinary looking. I mean, what are your chances of landing a beauty in whatever country?

As a general rule in China and elsewhere: the more strapping the guy, the more appealing the woman accompanying him. Wandering around the French Concession area recently on a balmy summer night in Shanghai, I passed by one such couple. She was about thirty, boasted beautiful eyes and big braless boobs in a silk shirt. I did a double take, and her psychedelic tights revealed an ass that was nothing short of devastating. Way out of my league. The foreign guy was pushing sixty, but you could see why this wasn’t your usual sugar-daddy setup, as in countryside girl in miniskirt and

high heels trailing flabby old white-haired dude. He had cachet—tall, fit, handsome, raffishly but stylishly dressed and sporting dreadlocks. An artiste. Carried himself with an air of having made some sort of a name for himself. Maybe he was famous and I just didn't recognize him. It made sense his babe was the deluxe edition of *hot*, but for one significant flaw: she was short. I don't mean abnormally short, but of average female height—around 5'3 or 162cm. I'm sure he didn't mind; nor would I if I ever got my hands on the likes of her. However, the flaw was in fact pretty serious, for it meant she lacked *breeding*.

In the West, your breeding is evident in your bearing and speech. In China, your breeding is determined primarily by your height. The reason for this is deeply entrenched in all class-based societies (the British understand this better than the Americans) but goes back, in recent times, to the 1950s-70s, when a whole generation was born and raised on a starvation diet. Large swaths of the Chinese rural population starved to death in the famines of the '60s. Many of those who survived gave birth to genetically blighted offspring. An unfortunate but inescapable fact is that severe malnutrition in pregnant women and growing children results in stunted growth and stature. People born in those decades are still alive, which is why you see many short people in China. It's apparent in the striking contrast between the migrant males working in city construction sites and their urban counterparts towering over them as they spill out onto the street during lunch breaks, or the scrawny rural girls found in the shabbier brothels. In a nutshell, the shorter the Chinese are, the more likely they or their parents hail from the ravaged starvation-era countryside, and the taller and better-dressed they are, the more likely their family suffered comparatively less during the worst years, being urbanites.

Of course, there is no straightforward connection between height and social class. Genetic variation turns up well-bred short people everywhere, while the Chinese countryside today produces as many tall and robust human specimens as do the cities. Yet the stereotype is a tenacious one. The quality of your dress and speech may hint at your actual class origin, but your height is an instant marker of your *likely* class origin.

We also have notions of ideal height in the West, but it's a flexible thing, offset by other physical attributes or positive qualities. In China, height expectations are much more rigid and have the effect of locking people into their social class. It predominates over all other considerations in the marriage market. It is so important that personal ads in matchmaking sites cannot garner favorable responses without fulfilling the opposite sex's minimal requirements. The average height of Chinese women today is 5'1 (155.8cm), and of men 5'5 (167.1cm). According to online dating statistics, women

hoping to land a decent marriage prospect need to be two to six inches, and men one to five inches taller than the average. To artificially improve their breeding by one or two inches, many short Chinese undergo a ghastly procedure known as the “raising the height operation” (*zenggao shoushu*), in which they sever your legs at the shins and set the bones several centimeters apart so that they grow back together longer than before.

Once you are categorized by height, other factors come into play to maximize your remaining potential, in rough order of importance: If you are a man: money, education, manners, and looks. If you are a woman: looks, education, manners, and money.

You can spot the occasional Chinese women of breeding out in public, typically accompanied by a husband of like breeding. They form a handsome couple. She’s in the perfect 5’6-5’8 (170-175cm) range, yet it’s important she’s shorter than him so as not to draw too much attention to her height. She walks by his side or a modest pace behind, with a relaxed and unhurried comportment and a gentle swing of her pronounced hips. She is graced with large eyes, naturally dark eyebrows, clear fair skin, a shapely back (proper posture having been instilled in her), and generous breasts. She may have a bit of a belly, but it’s the natural female belly promising a healthy child; despite men’s stated penchant for slim women, at the end of the day what they really want is a body with something to grab onto. If she seems the quiet type, it’s because she has the cultured woman’s contemplative poise. It goes without saying she is of good family background and upbringing, but she invariably has a respectable education (MBA or MFA) to match.

Well-bred Chinese women are socialized differently. Possessed of all the requisite physical charms, they receive a steady stream of positive reinforcement from the people around them—family, relatives, friends, teachers—constantly reiterating how beautiful they are and how secure their future will be. They are courted, and married off early, to important men in the government or military, to wealthy and successful men. They may try out a token career for a few years before disappearing into the domestic fold of a well-placed family, but it’s an easy life. They are seldom tested by challenges and conditioned not to expect any. Inhabiting a closed world of military compounds or gated communities in hidden suburbs, contact with society is limited to small privileged circles. They are shielded from dangerous ideas and corrosive outside influences. They are strongly discouraged from contact with foreigners. While Hollywood blockbusters, Western cars and designer goods are okay, marriage to a foreigner is out of the question.

You would probably find any well-bred Chinese woman you were lucky enough to be introduced to (they won’t deign to talk to you otherwise) rather dull company. From their standpoint, why

should they give a whit about any but the most peerless and eligible males surrounding them? As they have class, beauty, a great body *and* happen to be tall, they may have their pick of men.

Chinese women who lack breeding, by contrast, receive little positive feedback from the people around them. If plain, they are made aware of it in no uncertain terms and advised not to entertain lofty marital expectations. If they are outright ugly, this is drilled into them as well. They thus learn to depend upon themselves. They hack out a career by their own wit, intelligence and perseverance. They study hard at school. Some develop strong, distinctive personalities and character, as a result of being hammered on the anvil of experience. Some go so far as to get a PhD, frowned on as not suitable for a woman. Viewed as suspicious types and weirdoes by their compatriots, they gravitate to the only people to take an interest in them, that other bunch of weirdoes known as foreigners.

This brings us back to the question of why foreigners get stuck with the female dregs, as it were. I hope I've made it clear that, as a foreigner, you can rule out the possibility of landing a woman of true breeding. Now, on the other hand, if you're satisfied with your present Chinese wife or girlfriend, regardless of her looks or background—since her inner beauty outshines her biological endowments—you're all set. There is also a significant group of foreign men who flock to Asia precisely because of their peculiar taste for tiny, diminutive women, and locals are more than happy to send them their way, a win-win situation for everyone (there's indeed a bride shortage in China due to the population imbalance, but not any woman will do; rural bachelors too require women of a certain breeding).

But as for the rest, namely those of you who wonder how you might be able to upgrade the physical product you find yourself stuck with, a checklist will help you see where you fall in the pecking order and ascertain your own level of breeding and potential:

- Are you tall? Height gives Chinese women some confidence that you're not of peasant stock in your own homeland. If you are short, are you willing to have your legs sawed off and re-attached? If not, you may need to settle for a female of proportionate height and figure (i.e., a good four to five inches shorter than you).

- Are you rich? Can you guarantee a potential mate long-term financial security? Do you have a car, and not just any car but one indicating your status, say, a Range Rover, BMW or Audi? Or, on the other hand, do you ride a bicycle in China? Do you feel that all the cars passing you by make you lose face? Do you hide your bike before meeting a date?

- Are you well educated, with a degree from a prestigious university? Did you choose your major wisely, in a lucrative career path? Or are you relegated to teaching English conversation because you lack any knowledge? Are you in default on your loans from some American football college and the reason you came to China is to escape your creditors?

- Do you have manners? If not of good family pedigree, then can you pass? Can you select a luxury Chinese restaurant? Do you know proper toasting etiquette? Or do you frequently wake up disoriented, sprawled out in your vomit in an alley somewhere in Beijing's Sanlitun's bar district? Oh, and do you speak any Chinese?

- Are you handsome? Are you at least clean-shaven and dress in fashionable and neatly pressed clothes? Or, on the contrary, ratty old T-shirts and jeans falling off your ass? Do you work out and have a flat stomach? How big is your beer belly? Because if you think American women have tough standards regarding male physique, Chinese girls will straight-out ask you if you're pregnant (and they're not necessarily bantering with you).

If your points all add up, you're in luck. The pool of Chinese women available to you will all have flaws, to be sure, somewhat wanting in breeding, but you still might be able to wing the likes of that hot babe who accompanied our aforementioned artiste gentleman.

If your points don't add up, however, you may have to adjust your expectations more in accordance with reality. Now, I don't think "ugly" is a fair word; it tends to be employed with casual sexism. But she will probably be quite plain, indeed, from the Chinese perspective, ruffraff. Then again so are you.