

# **grooming *que zi*: marriage exclusion and identity formation among disabled men in contemporary China**

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*For a guy like Chen Bin, it's much harder to find a spouse than for a lame woman. If you're a guy like him, if you use a crutch, if you wobble when you walk, everybody talks when you connect with a woman, and they say "Whaa! He's lame, who would want to marry him?"*

Field notes from an interview conducted in Wenchang County, Hainan, 1994

As the above quotation highlights, finding a spouse is an especially difficult matter for men in contemporary China whose bodies, like Chen Bin's, match local disability criteria.<sup>1</sup> To appreciate further how challenging it is for men like Chen to marry and how this sets them apart from their friends and neighbors, it is useful to look at statistics from a national survey conducted by epidemiologists on behalf of the China Disabled Persons' Federation. According to these epidemiologists' findings, in 1987 only four percent of the general population in China (ages 30 to 44) had never married. This low rate fits with the normative image of marriage among many people in Chinese cultural contexts: that men and women should and nearly always do marry (Stockard 1989; Tien 1991). The four percent figure also corresponds closely with how marriage in Chinese society, today and in the past, has been cast as a basic bulwark for economic survival and has served as an organizational centerpiece of Chinese ideals about personhood and the unfolding of a proper life (Cohen 1976; Mann 1991; McGough 1981; Watson 1989; Watson 1986).

The rate of the never-married, however, diverged markedly from the norm when these same epidemiologists surveyed only people whom they understood as matching the Chinese state's criteria for *can ji* (a term most often translated today as "persons with disabilities").<sup>2</sup> Of the 30–44 year-old so-called *can ji* they interviewed, one quarter were never married. Their survey findings, though, are even more interesting when disaggregated along gender lines. For women in the general population and their *can ji* sisters, the rates of the never-married were 0.5 and 4 percent, respectively. For men in the general population, the prevalence was estimated at 7 percent, and for those men that the government calls *can ji* the rate rose to 45 percent. (See Table 1.)

One underlying feature of these numbers—that generally men are more likely to be among the never-married than women—has been addressed by several scholars of late-imperial and post-imperial China (Harrell 1985; Min and Eades 1995; Pasternak 1989; Seldon 1993; Telford 1992; Watson 1989).<sup>3</sup> To date, most of these scholars have focused their attention to some

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*Using a form of narrative analysis, I explore how marriage in contemporary China influences people's identity formation as "men with disabilities." In particular, I examine how local practices of marriage exclusion shape the definition, marginalization, and experience of men who have trouble walking. This discussion is more phenomenological than most previous accounts of men's experiences of marriage in Chinese Society. [marriage, disability, identity, body, manhood, narrative, China]*

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Table 1: Rates of the Never-Married Ages 30–44.

| Population Type    | Overall | Female | Male |
|--------------------|---------|--------|------|
| General Population | 4%      | 0.5%   | 7%   |
| Can Ji Population  | 25%     | 4%     | 45%  |

(Di 1989:134–137, 1002–1043)<sup>4</sup>

degree on answering the question “Why don’t men marry?” Their analyses have often centered around the following demographic and socioeconomic explanations. Because the Chinese have culturally celebrated males more than females, girls have fallen victim to infanticide more frequently and have been provided far fewer vital resources (food, medical care, parental attention, etc.), factors that have led to sharp disparities in the neonatal mortality of males and females. This phenomenon, together with other amplifying forces, has meant that fewer women have been available to marry.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, owing to the numerical imbalance in potential mates, social status has affected men’s and women’s marriage patterns differently in at least one important regard. While social status has often shaped who men and women marry, it has also influenced significantly whether a man marries. As Telford states, in China whether men (unlike women) find a spouse has been “primarily conditioned by their social status” (1992:19). And to a large degree, what most of the above scholars have meant by social status until now has been economic variables such as land ownership and the wherewithal to make marriage payments.<sup>6</sup>

Deploying such perspectives, these scholars have left unexamined at least two important issues. First, they have yet to consider how bodily differences beyond gender—like those signified by the term *can ji*—may influence both social status and marriage (cf. Phillips 1993).<sup>7</sup> Second, they have yet to examine in detail the ways marrying or not marrying may shape identity formation.

To be sure, other China scholars have paid more attention to the generative relationship between marriage, embodiment, social stratification, and identity (e.g., Bray 1997; Ebrey 1993; Hershatter 1997; Jaschok 1988; Ko 1997; Mann 1991; Watson 1991). These scholars have produced rich historical studies that explore how marriage and other social practices have influenced the biosocial parameters of gender and framed the socioeconomic position of wives, concubines, prostitutes, widows, and maidservants. But while these studies have given attention to bodily issues associated with Chinese womanhood and how these issues have influenced women’s marital and socioeconomic roles, they have given little attention to non-gender-specific bodily markers (cf. Ebrey 1993:63). Also, because their data have been mostly drawn from second-hand retrospective documents rather than informants in the midst of marital events, these studies have not provided much detail on how the interplay of marriage and embodiment has shaped processes of identity formation at the interpersonal level.

These lacunae are not unique to China studies, however. Yanagisako and Collier highlight that kinship studies frequently have ignored bodily differences or treated them as presocial, natural facts, as things that exist “outside of and beyond culture” (1987:29). As a corrective, they argue that further attention needs to be placed on marriage as a set of sociopolitical practices that influences the formation of people’s gender identities. Challenging while building upon Yanagisako and Collier’s insights, Borneman (1996) urges anthropologists to examine how marriage regimes contribute to the reification and marginalization of categories of persons—such as “gay” and “HIV-positive”—that are not necessarily gender-specific, but which like all social categories exist in relation to gender. He additionally argues that, to better understand the ways marriage contributes to such reification and marginalization, anthropologists must pay

closer attention to the inner workings of marriage practices, especially how they exclude, how they keep people who wish to wed from doing so.

My goal in this article is to explore some ways, in contemporary China that practices of marriage exclusion contribute to the psycho-socio-political formation of “disabled men.” My analysis is thus more phenomenological than most academic accounts of marriage in Chinese society. Indeed, instead of examining how demographics and socioeconomics determine the frequency with which people marry or how marriage regimes contribute to the framing of gender constructs, I place primary emphasis on how marriage and embodiment influence the intersubjective formation of identity.

In taking this course, I also expand on the approaches of Yanagisako, Collier, and Borneman. Rather than emphasizing the way marriage exclusion generically contributes to the reification and marginalization of a somasocial category like “the disabled,” I detail some of the social mechanisms that bring about such reification and marginalization in contemporary China. To isolate and understand these mechanisms, I analyze two lengthy marriage-exclusion cases. I investigate these cases using a form of narrative analysis that, while originally devised to explain the workings of texts, has considerable value, I suggest, for illuminating processes of identity construction.

### ***que zi***

In order to narrow the parameters of my discussion, I focus on marriage exclusion among people in present day China who share a specific Chinese idiom: *que zi*. An approximate translation of *que zi* into English is “the lame.” But such a gloss is incomplete in that it under-emphasizes two crucial characteristics of the term. First, while in earlier epochs *que zi* was used to signify those with either a “sick hand or foot” (*shou jiao bing*), since the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) it has designated those who have trouble “moving” (*dong*) and whose gait lacks “normal balance” (Lu and Dao 1996:10–12), people who—as many informants have described to me—either cannot walk or “wobble” when they walk.

Second, *que zi* is an intensely pejorative idiom. Its negative meanings probably derive in part from ways Confucian doctrine has historically transmuted bodily imperfection into social imperfection.<sup>8</sup> In an often-invoked passage, *The Book of Filial Piety* describes Confucius as teaching that those who allow even their hair or skin to be injured have betrayed a sacred responsibility to preserve the body afforded them by their parents.<sup>9</sup> In the last decade, the Chinese government, in a campaign to destigmatize a number of locally marked bodily differences, has encouraged people to replace *que zi* and other idioms with *can ji*—a word the state has promoted as biomedically oriented and thus more modern, objective, and morally neutral.<sup>10</sup> But in fact *can ji*'s etymology long predates biomedicine's introduction to China and is linked to a host of negative meanings and practices.<sup>11</sup> Possibly in part for those reasons, the state's recent linguistic engineering efforts have had nominal influence on everyday spoken language; save for some cadres and well-educated citizens, most Han Chinese<sup>12</sup> have continued using idioms like *que zi* (and its cognate, *bo zi*, which can be translated as “crippled”).

During an ethnographic research project I conducted in China from 1993 to 1995, I met, interviewed, and befriended hundreds of people that most Chinese speakers would call *que zi*—though not usually to their faces. One of the most important things these informants repeatedly said was how strongly they objected to others in their communities using the term *que zi* to describe them. Yet as is common with marginalized social categories in many cultural contexts, these same men frequently used the term *que zi* during discussions to distinguish themselves from others in their communities. Understanding how these people have crossed into such a situation—how they have entered a social space where they at times embrace, at times spurn a *que zi* identity<sup>13</sup>—is my larger goal in this article. And before proceeding it needs

noting that because the people I describe here are burdened by their indeterminate relationship to the term *que zi*, I deploy a similarly indeterminate rhetorical stance when referring to them. Throughout this article, I alternate between calling my informants *que zi* (lame people) and people whom others call *que zi* or lame. For reasons of respect, I try whenever possible to use the second sort of phrasing; yet in instances when I do not, I highlight the social and moral complexities at stake by adopting the far from perfect convention of applying quotations around the terms “*que zi*” and “lame.”<sup>14</sup>

In order to analyze how marriage exclusion in China promotes the experiential movement toward the uncertainty of being-yet-not-being “lame,” it is tempting to use one or more of the theoretical approaches others have used for studying the disabled and chronically infirmed.<sup>15</sup> Rather than directly deploying these well-crafted frames, however, I pursue a different approach here. I begin instead by focusing analytical attention squarely on issues of narration and expectation. For, as my informants explained to me, often what is most central to shaping and sustaining their sensations of being “*que zi*” are ways Chinese people talk about their damaged legs, their crutches, their wheelchairs, and especially their wobbly gaits, and how this talk shapes various hopes and expectations. As one Beijinger, Mr. Li, describes his experience:

After I began walking with a wobble, everybody started looking at me and talking. Looking and talking. Looking and talking. They called me *que* or *can fei* [literally meaning “deficient” and “useless”]. People now, especially in Beijing, use the dainty term *disabled* (*can ji*). But what’s that? It’s just some bullshit term the government came up with recently. Really it doesn’t matter what term is used, they all make me feel horrible and worthless (*mei yong de*). . . . The looking and talking wasn’t so bad when I was young. It didn’t happen so often and I barely noticed. It became really bad though when I tried to marry. Growing up, I saw all these people around me finding themselves or their children a partner (*dui xiang*) and marrying. This made them feel good and valuable. Naturally, my family hoped for me to marry as soon as possible. More than anything else, they thought it would make me feel better, make me feel valuable. But it hasn’t. Whenever I’ve tried to find someone, people start laughing and talking about how foolish my hopes are, and I just end up feeling more and more like a worthless *que zi*.

I would suggest that engaging theories of narrativity is one way of understanding how the interplay of talk and hope that transpires during marriage exclusion pushes people like Mr. Li toward a partial acceptance of themselves as “*que*.” In recent years, anthropologists of the body working in China and elsewhere have turned increasingly to narrative approaches to illuminate links between meaning making and experience (e.g., Barrett 1988; Kleinman and Kleinman 1988; Mattingly 1998). This interest in narrativity has been stimulated in part by some now commonplace recognitions about ethnography: that one primary avenue any ethnographer has for understanding informants’ experiences is the narratives they and others tell; that informants’ experiences, like their narratives, are always to some degree processual or unfolding; and that the shaping of such experiences is linked to how informants can be both the source and object of narration. Just as important, however, attention to narrativity in the anthropology of the body has been prompted by sophisticated studies conducted elsewhere in the academy during the last two decades. These studies indicate that mechanisms underlying narrativity—such as storytelling, dialogue, and audience reception—may, in fact, be closely akin to mechanisms driving various sociopolitical processes including identity formation (e.g., Bakhtin 1981; Bruner; 1986; Habermas 1984; Ricoeur 1981).

### *neng li*

Something increasingly central to the talk that often surrounds and defines “*que zi*” when they try to marry is *neng li*. Dictionaries usually gloss *neng li* as “ability” and to a lesser degree “functional force” or “power.” At times, Chinese people today describe *neng li* as a biologically inherited entity similar to the English term *talent*. At times, they view it as an extension of one’s parents’ authority, as in the phrase, “Her dad is a vice secretary of the standing council; she’s



## neng li, narrativity, and marriage exclusion: two cases

Let us now consider how the making and remaking of neng li narratives contributes to “que” men’s identity formation during the search for a partner. In the areas where I conducted fieldwork—a middle-income district of Beijing and a rural area of eastern Hainan, a Chinese province located near Vietnam—finding a partner and marrying involves intervention by a large number of people, such as parents, friends, relatives, and professional matchmakers. These persons usually hope to put men and women together who can serve as positive symbols of each other’s family and personal neng li, who can provide embodied enunciations of each other’s vibrancy and strength (past, present, and future). In Beijing, as far as most marriage-age men and their families are concerned, for a prospective wife to project such ability she is expected at the very minimum to possess the habits and markings of two things: a big-city upbringing and full health (*jian quan*). In agro-centric areas like my east Hainan field site, the emphasis given to regional association is somewhat less than the stress placed upon full health.<sup>20</sup>

Whether in eastern Hainan or Beijing, the people involved in finding a partner for a brother, a nephew, or a son often begin their search by creating an introductory description. This description (sometimes called a *jie shao shu*, an “introductory script or book”) is designed for verbal presentation to prospective women and their families and friends. The presenters generally strategize among themselves and with the male suitor about what elements will make a good and effective description. A common description at this early stage is one that simply lists the man’s and his family’s positive attributes—what could be viewed as their collective neng li—while downplaying or avoiding mention of any perceived problems.<sup>21</sup> Depending on a number of factors, including how much information the woman’s side is able to acquire independently about the man, the presentation of an introductory description may lead to a direct meeting between the man and woman and often their families. Such meetings usually are disastrous because, when the woman and her family finally see the man, they feel deceived; they feel that the expectations projected by the man’s introductory narrative have been shattered. Failed meetings and the invectives that frequently result are traumatizing events for the man’s side as well, since their collective hopes or expectations likewise are broken.

### Ah Bo

The following story, I believe, illustrates this process well. Ah Bo is in his mid-thirties and lives in a village of Wenchang county, in eastern Hainan. Ah Bo grows papayas and has a large house that he and his older brother inherited when their father died 20 years ago. Around the time of the father’s death, Ah Bo’s brother married and began having children. In the mid-1980s, as Ah Bo was maturing into young adulthood, his brother, mother, and sister-in-law began pressing him to marry. But finding a local woman for Ah Bo proved nearly impossible. In part, old and new sociological forces were to blame. In addition to the ongoing pattern in Wenchang county of higher numbers of males than females growing into young adulthood,<sup>22</sup> China’s market reforms there have pushed marriage-age men and women apart. Since the mid-1980s, many young women of eastern Hainan have been opting to leave home for cities like Haikou, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou in order to work in the many newly created service sector jobs, thereby escaping the farming duties that local families have traditionally foisted upon young females. Young men of the region, by contrast, have been less inclined to take to the cities until they have children to support, in part because the urban jobs available to them recently have been mostly in construction, a vocation they consider dangerous and arduous.

To overcome this shortage of local unmarried women, Ah Bo’s mother decided to enlist the help of several female friends who work as matchmakers. Two of the matchmakers immediately encouraged Ah Bo to consider marrying a neighborhood woman who was deaf. But Ah Bo and

his brother proclaimed that a union with someone deaf or otherwise “abnormal” (*bu zheng chang*) was unacceptable. Like their mother, they felt a marriage to a deaf woman was incommensurate with Ah Bo’s and their family’s status and their consequent expectations of what kind of woman Ah Bo should marry. In addition to rejecting the matchmakers’ initial idea, the two brothers asked the matchmakers to avoid discussing with prospective brides anything regarding either Ah Bo’s childhood polio episode or his withered leg.<sup>23</sup> Instead, they instructed their mother’s friends to emphasize the realities that they perceived as most central to Ah Bo’s existence: his friendly manner, his intellectual acuity, his quickly expanding papaya grove, his family’s big house, and his brother’s lucrative shrimp farm.

Using such a description, the matchmakers were able to arrange four separate introductions over an equal number of years. Each of these meetings was a failure. In every case, the young woman arrived, saw Ah Bo standing with his homemade crutch under arm, and quickly asked the matchmakers to bundle her home. Two of the women burst into tears on seeing Ah Bo. On one occasion, a father who had accompanied his daughter became irate, bombarded Ah Bo and the matchmaker with invectives, and demanded that Ah Bo’s brother compensate him for his travel expenses and the ridicule he might receive from his co-villagers if the story followed him home. Ah Bo’s brother refused to compensate the father, and was chided the next day by the village secretary for trying to cheat others and nearly causing a brawl.

For Ah Bo, the four introductions orchestrated by the matchmakers were extremely painful events that deeply affected him. As he told me:

After each meeting, news spread throughout the community. For many days, people in the village and the nearby town were talking and laughing. They shouted out to me, “Ah Bo, you’re such a silly *que zi* thinking you can marry a regular girl.” It made me feel terrible and very depressed. I couldn’t sleep. I didn’t want to eat. Everything felt uncomfortable and strange. Everything I hoped for seemed out of reach. . . . After a while I got better, but not completely. I’ve never felt really the same since those meetings.

Men like Ah Bo and their families usually will continue searching, often lowering their expectations to include women with whom a marital relationship would project less ability: women from poorer or less culturally sophisticated backgrounds, women who are in another way locally defined as abnormal, or women who live in less advantageous areas of the country. These searches may extend for hundreds of miles and go on for years, sometimes with the direct involvement of the “lame” man, often surreptitiously in order to avoid his opposition. With each new stage of the search, with each reorientation of their expectations, the seekers commonly re-think and revise their introductory description, often transforming it from a non-linear list of positive attributes into a compelling story line about family tragedy and how this tragedy has resulted in a man who possesses both strengths and weaknesses.

This effectively describes the continuation of Ah Bo’s story. After years of failure, Ah Bo’s brother and sister-in-law together with neighbors increasingly pressured Ah Bo to lower, as they had been doing, the expectation of the kind of bride he could have. As Ah Bo’s brother told me, “We kept after him to let us find him a woman befitting the reality of his personal condition.” In spite of this heavy pressure, Ah Bo demurred. As a consequence, his brother and sister-in-law, who were becoming more and more irritated at Ah Bo for not fulfilling the expectation of having a spouse contributing to the joint family’s housework, decided to have one of the matchmakers set up meetings between Ah Bo and two women from a neighboring township. The first woman was mute, the second was what Hainanese call *gnou hui*, meaning mentally ill or “retarded.”<sup>24</sup>

One afternoon as we sat in the family courtyard cleaning a basket of peas, Ah Bo’s sister-in-law quietly told me how she, her husband, and the matchmaker remade Ah Bo’s introductory narrative in preparation for its delivery to the families of the two women. The revised narrative was quite unlike the original; it described a different unfolding to Ah Bo’s past, present, and future life. According to the sister-in-law, it went something like this:

When he was born, Ah Bo was a big healthy baby. He was everybody's favorite. One very rainy winter when he was about three, Ah Bo got a bad fever. Nobody thought to take him to a doctor right away. A few days after the fever went away, Ah Bo's left leg became very painful and weak and he had a hard time walking. His mother and older brother carried Ah Bo to see many doctors. The doctors gave him massage and burn treatments. They burned him up and down his little legs. Ah Bo cried for days. But it didn't work. Nothing worked. After that, Ah Bo, spent most of his childhood crawling around his home and the area just outside it. . . . An older cousin, who felt bad that Ah Bo was a *que zi* and could not walk, taught him to read. Now he can read and write everything. He's always helping his friends write letters. He's smart, that Ah Bo. With the money his brother loaned him, he planted a bunch of papaya trees. Now he has more than a hundred trees. Most of the trees are still saplings, but when they get big they'll produce many, many papayas each year. . . . Even though he'll always be a *que zi*, Ah Bo will do well, just like his brother, with his big shrimp farm.

When a narrative like this works, when people like Ah Bo's family present it to potential mates and the potential mates find it, at once, attractive and an accurate reflection of the "lame" man's life, it is often the case that the man rejects the women on the grounds they do not meet his minimal requirements.<sup>25</sup> Such refusals frequently cause relatives and nearby observers to lash out at the man for being arrogant, for not humbly accepting the reality portrayed in the revised narrative.

In Ah Bo's case, the introduction of the two women—one mute, one *gnou hui*—and Ah Bo's categorical rejection of them incited a series of squabbles between Ah Bo and his brother's family that ultimately resulted in Ah Bo and his aged and infirmed mother moving out of the family's sprawling, white-stucco house and into a dark, small, brick hut. This hut is located on the community's outskirts, a veritable no-man zone only accessible to the village's household clusters via a very pitted, kilometer-long, sandy track. For Ah Bo, being forced out of his home has been a source of enormous suffering, both because of his embarrassment as well as the daily difficulties he must endure caring for himself and his mother. It is indeed a horrible paradox that, in the end, Ah Bo's resistance to what he considered his brother's and sister-in-law's attempt to throw him into a marginal marriage resulted in those same people physically casting Ah Bo out of his home and onto the social and geographic margins of normal life.

Ah Bo's story does not end here, however. At the time I met Ah Bo and his mother in the spring of 1993, approximately four years after their exile, Ah Bo and his mother were sharing their cramped hut with a third person: a 22-year-old pregnant woman whom Ah Bo introduced as his new wife, Mei Ling. Because I knew nothing of Ah Bo's life at that point, Mei Ling's presence did not seem particularly significant. That was until she and I began speaking. In response to a local greeting I expressed to her, Mei Ling spoke to me, not in Wenchangese, but in a distinctively accented Mandarin common to only one part of China—Guangxi—an economically underdeveloped region of the People's Republic located about 150 miles northwest of Hainan.<sup>26</sup>

As my fieldwork progressed and our friendship developed, Ah Bo and Mei Ling often described their situation to me. They told me that they initially learned of one another in 1992 through a personal ad Ah Bo placed in a national magazine. They told me Mei Ling was not the first Guangxi woman Ah Bo—via ads and subsequent correspondence—had inspired to come to Hainan. She was the fourth. The previous three women, after traveling to meet Ah Bo, stayed with him and his mother only a short time before returning home.

Ah Bo and Mei Ling also disclosed that, even though they were about to have a child, the two of them had never officially wed. The source of their illegitimacy, Mei Ling explained, was her father, who, on learning his daughter had chosen a "*que*" groom, barred his Guangxi village secretary from issuing Mei Ling a pre-marital certificate. On a number of occasions, Mei Ling stated that she was willing to endure her father's scorn and live out-of-wedlock with Ah Bo, in part because of Hainan's economic advantages. But she also stressed that Ah Bo's honesty played a large part in her thinking. "One of the things I like about Ah Bo is he didn't try to hide things from me before I came here. He described everything in his letters."



Despite the friendship I developed with Mei Ling and Ah Bo, it was never appropriate for me to see their letters. But, on one occasion, Ah Bo did explain to me how he represented himself in the ad that initially caught Mei Ling's eye.

MK: Did the advertisement that Mei Ling spotted vary significantly from the previous ones you wrote?

AB: I was more careful when I wrote that ad to describe myself and my physical condition very accurately.

MK: Do you remember what you wrote?

AB: I pretty much just said I was a 32-year-old Hainan man, that I had a small house and a papaya grove, and that my leg was no good.

MK: You said there was something wrong with your leg?

AB: Sure. If I didn't, anybody who answered the ad would become very resistant once they found out. I had to say I was a disabled person (can ji ren).

MK: You wrote you were a can ji ren?

AB: No. Actually, I didn't use that word. I just said I was a polio (*shi xiao-er-ma-bi-zheng de*).

MK: Did you consider using the other, more idiomatic word for disability in your ad, the word *can fei*?

AB: No. I wouldn't use *can fei*. I hate it when people call me that. *Fei* means useless and I don't consider myself useless. I'm just a little bit lame (*que*). When people call me *can fei*, I'll often tell them the only thing worthless around here is what they see in the mirror.

The events leading up to Ah Bo publicly depicting himself as a "polio" or somebody a "little bit lame" have, together, contributed to a painful process, whereby Ah Bo's expectations of who he is and what he could accomplish have been repeatedly shattered and he has been pushed into a marginal space which, when I last spoke to him, he seemed to be recognizing increasingly as his own. Because of these events and because of Ah Bo's deep desire to fulfill the overarching expectation of marriage, he has reluctantly come to depict himself more and more as others do. But, as his distaste for the word *can fei* clearly demonstrates, Ah Bo continues to find others' readings of him hurtful and delegitimizing, and so he tries to resist them.

### reader-response theory

In terms of theoretical analogies, the processes undergirding Ah Bo's marriage travails seem to echo ideas explored by the reader-response theorist Wolfgang Iser. Iser's main objective has been investigating how narratives are "organized and reorganized" over time through the intersubjective interactions of authors and readers (Iser 1974:281). Byron Good (1994:143–144) has pointed out that Iser's work is particularly relevant to anthropology because it allows one to think about how, through practices of everyday interaction, informants make meaning of and about their own unfolding experiences. Pieces of reader-response theory that seem particularly relevant to my discussion of marriage exclusion, I would suggest, are Iser's ideas about expectations and negation. In his volume *The Implied Reader* (1974), Iser details how, based on past shared events, readers tend to expect specific things from narratives. As readers progress through a story, the unfolding sentences fulfill expectations at the same time they form new expectations for readers—expectations that are themselves modified by succeeding sentences (Iser 1974:278). The processes of anticipation and retrospection, however, may not develop smoothly. Sometimes what readers find as they move through a narrative does not fulfill their expectations. Sometimes stories have unpredictable gaps or ruptures that cause readers' expectations to be suddenly negated (Iser 1974:280). To overcome such negations and continue moving through the story, readers must create new expectations. They must, through processes of trial and error, use their faculties of comprehension (Iser 1974:59) to organize and reorganize the various meanings offered them by authors and fellow readers in order to create a new

horizon for themselves (Iser 1974:281). And because readers have overlapping backgrounds, yet possess personal “dispositions,” negations may be handled differently, Iser says (1974:281).<sup>27</sup>

These ideas have a certain utility for my study because they allow me to think about how people’s expectations of who they are and what befits them are influenced as the events of marriage exclusion unfold. Iser’s concepts provide a general framework to view how hopes that are part and parcel of people’s sense of themselves—such as those held by Ah Bo and described above—are influenced intersubjectively over time by the interaction of the many people involved in marriage making (cf. Goodwin and Duranti 1992).

Using Iser’s ideas of expectation and negation, the following analysis could be made of Ah Bo’s story. As Ah Bo progressed into early adulthood, he and his family observed people around them fulfilling the perennial Chinese goal of marriage. These observations or readings promoted long-standing expectations among them for Ah Bo. And following local convention, Ah Bo and his family created introductory descriptions built upon these expectations that projected a certain picture of Ah Bo for potential mates. But the potential mates and their families, on meeting Ah Bo, saw something different from what they had come to expect. Instead of viewing a fully healthy person, they saw something else; what they apprehended they communicated forcefully through invective, which caused Ah Bo to experience a sharp negation of who he felt he was and wanted to be. Under the pressure to marry, Ah Bo and his family decided they had little choice but to create new introductory descriptions that gradually projected a different horizon for Ah Bo. This narrative progression, which continues today, has been protracted and painful for Ah Bo. Although he has resisted reorienting his expectations to the unfolding collective transcript placed before him by others—that he is a disabled man—he has grudgingly allowed this reorientation to occur so that he can move closer to marrying.

## Chen Yu

As the next case demonstrates, the analytical value of Iser’s ideas in helping to discern how practices of marriage exclusion in China contribute to the identity making of disabled men is not limited only to reputed backwaters of the country like Hainan province. Indeed, many of the same narrative components Iser’s ideas illuminate in Ah Bo’s story can be found shaping people’s lives elsewhere in the People’s Republic, including Beijing.

Chen Yu is in his mid-thirties and lives in Xuan Wu district, a working-class neighborhood of Beijing located southwest of Tiananmen Square. Chen runs a successful tobacco shop he opened in 1989. Two miles down the road from the shop, Chen shares a relatively spacious apartment with his parents, who are retired factory managers. To get back and forth to his shop and to conduct business, Chen drives a three-wheeled motorcycle, a unique device designed and marketed by the Chinese government especially for people who, like Chen, meet the state’s criteria for lower-body disabilities.<sup>28</sup>

Chen and I first met at a karaoke party organized by a branch of the institution that created and today sells disability motorcycles: the Disabled Persons’ Federation. Established in 1988 by Deng Xiaoping’s paraplegic son, Deng Pufang, the Federation is a rapidly expanding government agency with offices in nearly every urban district and town of the People’s Republic.<sup>29</sup> The basic mandate of the Federation and its many offices is to “serve and represent” China’s recently identified population of more than 60 million disabled people.<sup>30</sup>

Initially, Chen Yu wanted nothing to do with the Disabled Persons’ Federation, nor did he wish to be considered part of the Federation’s newly recognized constituency.

When the Federation began to make noise in the 1980s, I had no interest in it. Why the hell would I want to be connected with it. The last thing I wanted back then was for people to call me disabled. I had plenty of people calling me a useless cripple (can fei) when I was a kid. I hated it. [But] then the Federation

started to produce these motorcycles. The advantages of having one of these bikes in Beijing, where regular motorcycles are illegal and where nobody can afford an auto, was just too great. So, I got one. Besides helping me start my own business, I figured having a motorcycle would make me seem more competent (*neng gan*) and thus eventually help me find a good wife.

In 1990, through a third-person introduction, Chen Yu began to date Geng La, a woman his parents once described to me as a "lovely and able-bodied (*jian quan*) girl from a good family." The friend who introduced Chen and Geng told me how he united them.

Chen Yu asked me several times to help him meet somebody like Geng. I knew both Chen and Geng for a number of years, and they seemed like a good match to me. So, sometime during 1990, I approached Geng using a pitch Chen and I had prepared. It basically went like this: "I think you might be interested in meeting my friend Chen Yu. You have a lot in common. You're the same age, from similar families, and both like studying English and collecting classical music. Like you, Chen is unattached and interested in meeting somebody. Everybody who knows Chen says he's extremely competent and has a strong future. Besides having a quickly growing business, he owns a motorcycle and has a spacious apartment." Of course, I told Geng about Chen's legs, how he had polio when he was young. Chen and I had decided that I should tell Geng about that up front. I did and then quickly moved on to wow her with all the good stuff.

Through this introduction, Chen and Geng La met, became friends, and dated for several years. Hearing about and seeing Chen's legs were apparently not overriding concerns for Geng. But they were for her mother and father, who could not accommodate their long-term hopes for their daughter to Chen's body. From the very beginning, Geng's parents hounded her to stop seeing what they often called "that motorcycle-driving que zi." According to Chen Yu, one afternoon in 1991, while he and Geng were at their respective work places, Geng's parents came to his home, articulated the following to his parents, and stormed off: "This relationship has gone on long enough. We will not have our daughter marry your son. It is not right. You should have your son marry somebody of his own kind." When Chen Yu came home that night, his parents told him what happened. The next day, a mutual friend delivered a letter to Chen, in which Geng La stated she could never see him again. The words Geng La's parents delivered and the ones she put in her letter shattered Chen's expectations, leaving him painfully confused about himself and his future.

This was one of the most hurtful and traumatic events of my life. For many months after Geng dumped me, I felt as if I had been in a terrible crash: that I ran into something while driving my motorcycle, been tossed over my handlebars, and slammed into a wall. The pain was so intense and my sense of confusion so severe, I really thought I might go insane.

The people with whom Chen found most solace after losing Geng La were a group of men he began befriending when he purchased his first three-wheeled motorcycle. Most of these men are polio survivors who, like Chen, have taken advantage of their special access to three-wheeled motorcycles and other privileges the state has extended recently to promote "disability businesses."<sup>31</sup> Based upon their common experiences as disabled entrepreneurs, these men have created an intimate and quite distinct social network (Kohrman 1996), which is partially reflected in the term the group's members frequently use to address each other: disability brothers (*can ji ge mer*).

About six months after Chen's and Geng's break up, some of Chen's disability brothers introduced him to a woman, Lin Famei. The disability brother most responsible for the introduction, Su Shande, recounted to me the basic message he conveyed to Chen Yu and Lin Famei.

Basically, what I told each was, "I think the two of you might make a good couple. You're both Beijingers, are intelligent, have similar families, and have something making it difficult to marry an able-bodied person (*jian quan ren*). Chen Yu, you're a polio survivor and, Lin Famei, you're legally blind. If you can accept these realities, you might greatly enjoy each other's company."

Chen and Lin Famei subsequently dated, fell in love (*tan lian ai*), and contemplated marriage. But both Chen's and Lin's parents staunchly forbade wedlock. They would not condone one of

their family members marrying a disabled person. On a number of occasions, Chen and his parents argued so intensely over this matter that Chen moved out of the family apartment and stayed in guest houses and with different friends. During this extended period of intergenerational conflict, Chen's disability brothers (some of whom had married rural women or Beijingers with a recognized "defect" [*que dian*]) encouraged Chen and Lin to steel themselves against their parents' disapproval. But family pressure eventually won out, and today Chen and Lin Famei have resigned themselves to never marrying one another. Shortly before I left Beijing, Lin Famei informed me she had consented to her parents introducing her to a rural man. Chen Yu told me that his parents also wish to introduce him to somebody from outside Beijing. Chen stated, however, he would have no part of his parents' plans.

I've told my parents over and over I will only marry somebody raised in Beijing. At first, I hoped to marry somebody like Geng La. But now I understand that's impossible for somebody who's disabled like me, . . . still, I absolutely refuse to marry a country bumpkin. I know what many Beijingers, particularly young ones, say about polio survivors who marry hicks. They speak of them as being pitiful *que zi* who are so hungry for sex, offspring, and caregiving (*zhao gu*) that they'll take in a woman with whom they have almost no chance of ever developing real love. I may be a *que zi*, but, I'll tell you right now, I refuse to endure a loveless marriage or that sort of commentary. I've experienced too much pain already, and my life feels too abnormal as it is.

Much as in my first example, the ideas of Iser can help discern how Chen Yu's protracted marriage efforts have transformed ways he and central figures in his life have understood his situation. As his betrothal story unfolded, Chen and others repeatedly reoriented certain expectations for him that could be seen as constitutive components of his sense of being. More so than Ah Bo, Chen anticipated certain troubles when he began looking for a spouse; probably because of earlier negations he had, he sensed the possible difficulties he faced fulfilling common marriage hopes. So, to boost his financial situation and project an image of greater ability (*neng li*), Chen decided, somewhat paradoxically, to integrate aspects of the government's disability transcript and purchase a three-wheeled motorcycle. But the economic success wrought by Chen's increased mobility was not enough to change dominant readings of his life and win his first female acquaintance's hand. Geng La's parents rejected Chen because of his withered leg and because they interpreted it as meaning Chen was an unacceptable mate for their daughter. That Geng La accepted her parents' reading and broke off the relationship deeply unsettled Chen—traumatizing him, as he described it, like a high-speed motorcycle accident. Losing Geng La powerfully negated the sense of being that Chen had possessed until then and threw him head-long into an ill-defined realm so troubling that Chen thought he might go insane. As a way of gaining equanimity, Chen closely associated himself with other polio survivors. Through these interactions, Chen reframed his expectations and let others introduce him to the visually impaired Beijinger, Lin Famei. Chen's and Lin's parents, however, could not accept this romance. The two sets of parents, unmoved by Western discourses of love sweeping urban China in recent years (Zhang 1989), would rather have their children marry so-called "able-bodied" people from outside Beijing than "disabled" neighbors. When I last saw Chen, even though he was now sometimes calling himself a "*que zi*" or disability brother in front of me, he remained opposed to his parents' expectations and their attempts to throw him further into what he viewed as a more disabling social space. Instead, he remained committed to the collective expectation of a small but growing number of young city dwellers: that one is either to marry an urbanite ("able-bodied" or "disabled") with whom there exists a romantic attachment or remain unwed.

## conclusion

Even though invoking a few ethnographic stories to make observations about a culture area or set of theoretical issues is quite problematical, I believe the cases of Ah Bo and Chen Yu provide insight, however murky, on important facets about China, marriage, and social analysis.

First, they illustrate how marrying can be an imperfect, painful, and marginalizing process for some people in the People's Republic whose bodies—from birth or following some event (e.g., a tractor accident or a paralytic fever)—are locally defined as less able, as lacking *neng li*. Second, the case studies suggest that there is much for sinologists and others to glean by applying a perspective to marriage like that advocated by Yanagisako, Collier, and Borneman.

Third, the Ah Bo and Chen Yu stories shed light on specific ways marriage exclusion in China promotes processes of naturalization and identity formation. As I have explored, similar to how people engage texts with specific expectations, those involved in the betrothal of a man in China (parents, siblings, matchmakers, neighbors, friends, potential mates, and suitors) approach marriage with certain hopes. As the betrothal story unfolds and all these people interact, everybody makes a reading of the situation. As the search for a mate progresses, many of the participants will gradually reconfigure their expectations to fit those placed before them by others. For the key participant, however, such reconfiguring is a more protracted and socially destructive process that involves repeated negations. Yet, under the pressure to continue moving through the betrothal story, men like Ah Bo and Chen Yu often have little choice but to allow negations to influence how they see themselves and their futures as increasingly different from most members of their communities and increasingly like a delegitimized social Other.

Something important to note about this process is that, in spite of everything that has happened to them, in spite of how much they are negated, as far as many men like Ah Bo and Chen Yu are concerned, their reification as “*que zi*” or “disabled people” is far from complete. Long after others have determined hopes—like marrying a local or “able-bodied” woman—inappropriate to the supposed “*que zi*,” men like Ah Bo or Chen Yu often will cling to such expectations. I would suggest that their clinging is linked to how the ongoing processes of identity formation I have discussed here, much more than the mechanisms Iser has described, are so socially embedded. Inasmuch as twists and turns in a single book can wash away the sentiments one has acquired through earlier readings, the views that others provide about one's marriage prospects, no matter how shattering, cannot altogether displace one from long-developed and politically encompassing expectations (Connerton 1989). In part, this may be explained by the fact that, since China's *neng li* framework casts issues of male immobility so negatively, few like Ah Bo or Chen Yu would unconditionally accept having themselves essentialized as disabled, lest they lose all sense of themselves as men, as worthy and productive members of family and community structures (cf. Gerschick and Miller 1997). In part, it may be explained by the fact that, no matter how many times they experience negation, it is impossible for such men to step out of the locally dominant social texts: they reside in communities populated by the “able-bodied” and must regularly observe people around them affirming societal expectations including marriage (cf. Murphy 1990).

A final point that I would like to emphasize is that, although I believe Iser's ideas on narrativity can still offer certain conceptual clarity for exploring marriage exclusion's role in identity formation, to use them properly one must be vigilant to see them as, at best, “translational devices” (Herzfeld 1985:273). Otherwise people like the men described above could easily be misconstrued as readers or texts. And this is obviously not the case. Such men, as I have tried to show, are socially involved individuals, at one moment co-conspirators with family and friends, at the next angry agents who are intensely distressed by others' delegitimizing views of them. They are active members of local communities who, often unsuccessfully, try to shape their own and others' expectations.

## notes

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1. All Chinese names in this article are pseudonyms except for those of government officials, authors, and historical figures of common recognition.

2. In 1987, China's State Council recognized five categories of disability: "the blind," "the mentally disabled," "the deaf and mute," "the physically disabled," and "the mentally ill." The criteria for these categories were created and passed by the State Council in preparation for the 1987 National Sample Survey of Disabled Persons (Di 1989), China's first country-wide investigation of "disabled people" (can ji ren). Before the 1987 survey, the only state-defined disability criteria of the PRC were those for Revolutionary Disabled Veterans (*ge ming can fei jun ren*), which the Ministry of the Interior (*nei wu bu*) initially drafted in the early 1950s. For detailed discussion of the 1987 survey—its cultural construction and its functionality for the party-state as an objectifying technology of governmentality—see Kohrman 1999a.

3. Consistent documentation indicates that, in China, rates of the never-married have been higher among men during the last few hundred years. Telford (1992), for example, has calculated based on lineage genealogies that in one county of central China from 1520 to 1661, while nearly all women married sometime in their lives, 22 percent of men never married. Li and Lavelly (1995) document a similar situation in Jaingsu province during the 1930s, and Min and Eades (1995) found that in Anhui province's Xiao County during the early 1980s the rates of the never married were 10.4 percent for men and 0.11 percent for women ages 30 to 44.

4. These statistics were generated by the Chinese government's 1987 National Sample Survey of Disabled Persons (Di 1989). The survey sampled by household and collected information on people of all ages. The total number of residents 30 to 44 years-of-age sampled was 312,256. Of these, the survey identified 11,072 so-called disabled persons, 53 percent (5,856) of whom were men, 47 percent (5,216) of whom were women. The 1987 study's data for the never-married in the "general population" closely parallel data generated by a 1988 Chinese government study on marriage that had a sample of 900,000 citizens. This 1988 survey found that, within the 30–44 year-old age range, 3 percent of people had never married. Among women the rate was 0.3 percent, and among men it was 6 percent (National Statistical Bureau 1990:530–535). Because I have been able to acquire only limited background material on either of these studies, I do not know if their designers only recognized as married those citizens who have at one time or another received a formal marriage certificate after fulfilling the proper government procedures for marriage registration. This issue probably has not significantly affected the survey's findings, however, since in the People's Republic of China, common-law marriage has only recently begun to emerge after it was nearly wiped out by Maoism. Also this issue is not that important here since my goal in presenting these data is simply to paint a rough picture, relative to the national population, of the frequency of the never-married within China's so-called disabled population.

5. Two other factors commonly recognized as contributing to the reduction of eligible women in the marriage pool before 1949 have been a taboo on widow remarriage and male polygamy. This second factor has started to reemerge, albeit to a limited degree, in post-Mao China. A nationwide government sample survey of 1.04 percent of China's population conducted in 1995 indicates that a gender bias against girls continues to produce imbalances in the number and life chances of China's very young. The survey found that 53 percent of reported deaths in children ages 0 to 1 sampled occurred among girls and that the percentage of boys to girls ages 0–4 sampled was 54 percent to 46 percent (State Statistical Bureau 1996:72, 77). For the adult population ages 30 to 44, the 1990 National Census indicates that the sex ratio breakdown is 52 percent men to 48 percent women (Xiong 1995:17). In recent years, a demographic force increasingly contributing to China's ongoing sex ratio imbalance has been sex-selective abortion, made possible by the availability of amniocentesis and ultrasound. For more information on these issues see Chiao, Thompson, and Chen 1938:53; Croll 1987; Fei 1939:33–34; Greenhalgh and Li 1995; Sen 1990.

6. For instance, Li and Lavelly document that in Jaingsu province during the 1930s whether and when men married closely corresponded to land ownership and education attainment, something that they define as "a measure of socioeconomic status" (1995:302).

7. This oversight can be explained to some degree by the fact that, throughout the social sciences, the heightened sensitivity to the gendered body that emerged in the 1970s has only recently given way to, if not spawned, greater analytical attention to bodies more generally (Csordas 1994; Martin 1987; Turner 1992; cf. Mauss [1937]1979).

8. For a discussion of how local ideas and experiences of social imperfection in contemporary China relate and often do not relate to Western academic discourses, see Kleinman et al. 1995.

9. Chang's (1996:9) grandmother, born at the twilight of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), tells how she learned this very Confucian doctrine (what she calls "the first lesson of filial piety") early in life, and notes that its prohibition against self-mutilation inhibited her from committing suicide when she suffered great torment as a young woman. For additional discussions of somasocial delegitimation in late imperial China, see Hansson 1988.

10. In the 1980s, owing to such factors as the United Nations' efforts to globalize Euroamerican disability-advocacy initiatives as well as actions on the part of Deng Pufang (Deng Xiaoping's son) to create

a more salubrious environment for China's less abled citizenry, elements within China's party-state began pressing for the Chinese people to avoid pejorative terminology for bodily differences and to use more biomedical words. As a consequence, China's state-run media in the late 1980s began urging that phrases such as the "insane" (*feng zi*) and "demented" (*sha*) be avoided, advocating instead terms like "mentally ill" (*jing shen bing ren*) and "mentally disabled" (*zhi li can ji*). As part of this campaign, China's veterans' affairs bureaucracy did away with the term "Revolutionary Crippled Soldiers" (*ge ming can fei zhun ren*) and began using the phrase "Revolutionary Injured and Disabled Soldiers" (*ge ming shang can zhun ren*).

11. The two Chinese words that resonate most with *can ji* are *can fei* and *fei ji*. All three of these couplets date from Chinese antiquity. *Fei ji* appears in the Book of Rites (*li ji*) which emerged during the Han dynasty (202 B.C.–220 A.D.). *Can ji*—the term the Chinese state has been employing heavily since the mid 1980s—is used in documents as early as the Tang (618–906 A.D.). *Can fei*, likewise, appears in texts from the Wei (220–265 A.D.) forward. As early as the Yuan (1271–1368), the Chinese state used these terms to codify opprobrium toward certain bodily differences. For instance, during the Yuan, the imperial government issued an edict that barred at once the "fei ji" and the "mean people" (a quasi-penal/quasi-criminal/quasi-polluted category of person in dynastic China) from participating in the government's civil service examinations, the most important conveyance in dynastic China for male social mobility (Da Yuan Shengzheng Guochao Dianzhang 1976:31.11b, also cited in Hansson 1988:20). Contemporary dictionaries define the ideograms that make up the three couplets *can ji*, *can fei*, and *fei ji* as follows: *can*, a verb, meaning to injure, to spoil, to destroy, to oppress; a noun, denoting remnant or residue; *fei*, a verb, meaning to do away with, to abrogate, to waste, to destroy; an adjective denoting useless, wasted, or abandoned; and *ji*, a noun, meaning sickness, disease, or pain. Because of the particularly pejorative meanings associated with the ideogram *fei*—that is, the notions of waste and uselessness—China's party-state stopped using the terms *can fei* and *fei ji* in the mid 1980s and pressed for *can ji* to be used in their place.

12. The Han are China's largest ethnic group (*min zu*), making up more than 98 percent of the People's Republic's population.

13. Murphy et al. (1988) also have developed a dynamic, more processual portrait of disablement, one which they have based partially on anthropological concepts of liminality and partially on personal accounts of how those struggling with degenerative disease frequently have multiple views of themselves that change over time.

14. I feel it is best to avoid using euphemistic and historically contingent terms like *disabled* or *handicapped* in place of *que zi* because, as the American polio survivor Leonard Kriegel notes, these terms do "little more than further society's illusions about illness and accident. . . . For to be 'disabled' or 'handicapped' is to deny . . . the rage, anger, and pride of having managed to survive as a crippled" (1991:61). I also choose to invoke the category *que zi* throughout this article because one of anthropology's central goals, as I understand it, is to examine culture's culpability in the production of suffering. I feel this can only be done by direct observation of terms and their usage.

15. Examples of these include deviance (e.g., Lemert 1967), stigmatization (Goffman 1963), labeling (e.g., Zola 1993), structural-functionalism (e.g., Groce 1985), ritual (Murphy et al. 1988), social stratification (e.g., Jenkins 1991), medicalization (e.g., Davis 1995; Oliver 1996; Zola 1972), and political economy (e.g., Albrecht 1992; Stone 1984).

16. Indeed, much of the political turmoil after 1949 was connected to whether *neng li* should be structured around Marxist orthodoxy or technical knowledge (Madsen 1984; Meisner 1986).

17. The dichotomization of gender along the spheres of public and private was much more acute during the late imperial period. As Bray states,

In late imperial China, all levels of society considered the seclusion of women and the segregation of the sexes inside and outside the house to be not simply a sign of respectability but an essential factor in maintaining public morality. Spatial and social segregation was an expression of a doctrine of separate spheres dating back to classical times. This doctrine was not a simple charter for female subordination; rather it represented the sexes as fulfilling complementary roles of equal dignity (if not equal power). . . . Men and women controlled different domains, into which the other should not intrude. The female domain was the inner, domestic one (although we should beware of presuming absolute coincidence between Chinese and Western meanings of "domesticity"), and the male domain was the outer one. . . . More usually, however, women were represented as potentially disruptive of the social order, and the doctrine of separate spheres was used to justify their containment and control. [1997:128]

18. An example of the discursive link between manhood and centrifugal movement predating the People's Republic is that of Baoyu, the protagonist of the Qing novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. In this book, Baoyu is a source of great embarrassment for his father because he stays indoors with female relatives (Bray 1997:131). A more contemporary example of discourse linking manhood to mobility technologies is that of Lei Feng, the fictional Chinese communist hero. The Lei Feng story began to be disseminated by Maoist sycophants in the mid 1960s, and since then the central government has launched innumerable "study Lei Feng" campaigns to boost proper communist behavior. According to the rhetoric, Lei Feng was an inspirational figure who selflessly aided those in need. He was born into poverty and became an ardent communist when he joined the People's Liberation Army. The most transformative event for Lei Feng after joining the army was learning to drive a truck, a "skill that opened up his intellectual world" (Spence and Chin 1996:192). A reflection of how these discourses, old and new, play out in everyday

behavior today is the fact that, according to China's 1990 census, men compose 82 percent of those working in the nation's transportation sector (Xiong 1995:50).

19. The emphasis given to men moving through and ultimately occupying public space corresponds with Bray's comments that in late imperial China the "mundane purpose of marriage was to keep the household running in good order, with the husband responsible for outside matters, the wife for the inner domain" (1997:358).

20. For my informants in rural Hainan and Beijing, the desire to marry somebody local has related only nominally to the household registration (*hu kou*) system. Having a locally registered spouse is of minimal advantage in rural Hainan today, largely because the province's liberal "special economic zone" policies. Recent changes in Beijing's *hu kou* system for people officially labeled disabled, make for a similar situation there. In the late 1980s, the Beijing government created a loophole in the city's household registration regulations, permitting Beijing residents who are officially categorized as disabled (which most locally defined "que zi" may be) to have their spouses' household registration cards transferred to Beijing. With *hu kou* less of a problem, there remain two main reasons for which Beijing and Hainan "que zi" desire a local spouse. The first is that they feel a common upbringing is important for facilitating interpersonal communication and, increasingly, for developing "romantic" affection. The second reason is that marrying a local resident is considered a social symbol that one has the ability, the *neng li*, to attract a person of high cultural quality (*wen hua su zhi*). Many Beijing residents, particularly those born and raised in Beijing, consider Beijingers to be the most culturally sophisticated of all Chinese. Similarly, most Hainanese consider Wenchang county one of the most culturally sophisticated areas of the island, and thus local residents place a high premium on matches between Wenchang families.

21. Kleinman et al. find it a common phenomenon that, when arranging a marriage, "parents try to disguise that their child has epilepsy" (1995:1326). Also see Wolf 1972:107.

22. According to China's 1990 national census, in Wenchang county there were 52 men for every 48 women in the 20 to 44 age group (Hainan Province Census Office 1992:15-17).

23. *Polio* is short for *poliomyelitis*, an acute viral infection with a wide range of manifestations, of which the most well known is a weakening of muscles. In China, polio is usually referred to as *xiao er ma bi zheng* (infantile paralysis). Polio infection in China has dropped dramatically in the last two decades as a consequence of immunization programs. Between 1990 and 1994, the reported annual incidence of polio declined from 5,065 to 261 cases (World Health Organization 1995).

24. *Gnou hui* is a Wenchangese cognate of the Mandarin *sha*, which is a pejorative vernacular term often applied to the mildly mentally ill and/or impaired.

25. Similarly, Phillips states that, in some cases, schizophrenic patients refuse arranged marriages "either because they have unrealistic expectations for a spouse or because they have no interest in any form of social interaction" (1993:295).

26. Guangxi's administrative title is *zi zhi qu*, or "autonomous region." Today, the People's Republic of China comprises 21 provinces and five autonomous regions, the latter being Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Guangxi, and Tibet. Historically, all of these autonomous regions have lagged economically behind China's coastal provinces. The economic distance between Guangxi and Hainan has grown increasingly wide in the post-Mao era, particularly since the mid 1980s, when Beijing granted Hainan "special economic zone" status.

27. The different uses of the word *disposition* by Bourdieu (1977) and Iser (1974) reflect an important sociological tension. Bourdieu uses the word *disposition* to emphasize how the individual's entire being is bound up with collective structures of representation and organization. In contrast, Iser uses the word to emphasize the idiosyncratic capacities of persons and how these capacities are linked to collective processes. These differences aside, Bourdieu seems quite amenable to a literary-derived approach such as Iser's. As Bourdieu states, "native membership in a field implies . . . a capacity for practical anticipation of the 'upcoming' future contained in the present. . . . This is exactly the effect produced by the novel" (1990:66-67). Also see Hanks 1996:240-242.

28. Three-wheeled disability motorcycles were the first "rehabilitation products" designed by the China Rehabilitation Research Institute, a large medical complex built under the auspices of Deng Pufang's Disabled Persons' Welfare Fund, the institutional precursor of the Disabled Persons' Federation. Currently, three-wheeled motorcycles are used mainly within China's metropolitan landscape. The Chinese government requires that three-wheeled motorcycle drivers be people legally registered as disabled and who have disabilities limited to the lower body. Nonetheless, many people today who drive these motorcycles around urban China have no legally recognized disability and have not been licensed to drive the motorcycles. For further discussion of China's disability motorcycles, see Kohrman 1999b.

29. Deng Pufang became a paraplegic at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) while he was a graduate student at Beijing University. In the spring of 1968, under intense assault from Red Guards who demanded he resign his membership in the Communist Party and denounce his father as a class enemy, Deng jumped from a third-story window of a university building. After living isolated and immobilized in a dilapidated welfare facility on the outskirts of Beijing, Mao agreed to let Deng Pufang leave the facility, receive more sophisticated medical attention, and rejoin his family. In 1980, Deng Pufang flew to Canada for a form of spinal surgery unavailable anywhere in Asia. On his return to Beijing, Deng decided to build a facility like the one where he had received treatment in Canada—the Ottawa Civic Hospital—and have it serve as a flagship for the speedy development of rehabilitation medicine (*kang fu yi liao*) in China. To raise funds and enlist high-ranking support for the center, Deng Pufang and another physically disabled man



of elite personage, established the China Disabled Persons' Welfare Fund. As Deng's disability advocacy efforts expanded during the 1980s, the Welfare Fund grew in size and eventually became the Disabled Persons' Federation.

30. In the late 1980s, the Chinese government conducted the National Sample Survey of Disabled Persons, the first country-wide epidemiological study of its kind ever mounted in China. Based on intensely debated criteria and methodologies designed in conjunction with the United Nations, the survey was completed on April 1, 1987. Since then, officials of Deng Pufang's Disabled Persons' Federation have constantly invoked this survey's results to bolster the Federation as it has carefully gone about building broader bureaucratic and financial support, both within and outside of China. Based on the survey's findings (that 4.9 percent of its 1.5 million sample had disabilities) and national census figures on the size of the PRC's population, Federation officials estimated that China had 51.6 million disabled people in 1987. In the last year, the Federation has raised this figure to "over 60 million" in accordance with China's overall rate of population growth.

31. Since the mid 1980s, the Chinese government has urged men and women who meet the legal criteria for disability to become independent business people, thereby reducing the state's welfare burden. The main way the government has done this has been by extending tax credits. From 1984 (when the disability tax credit system was initiated) to 1995, more than 500,000 people registered as "disabled entrepreneurs."

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